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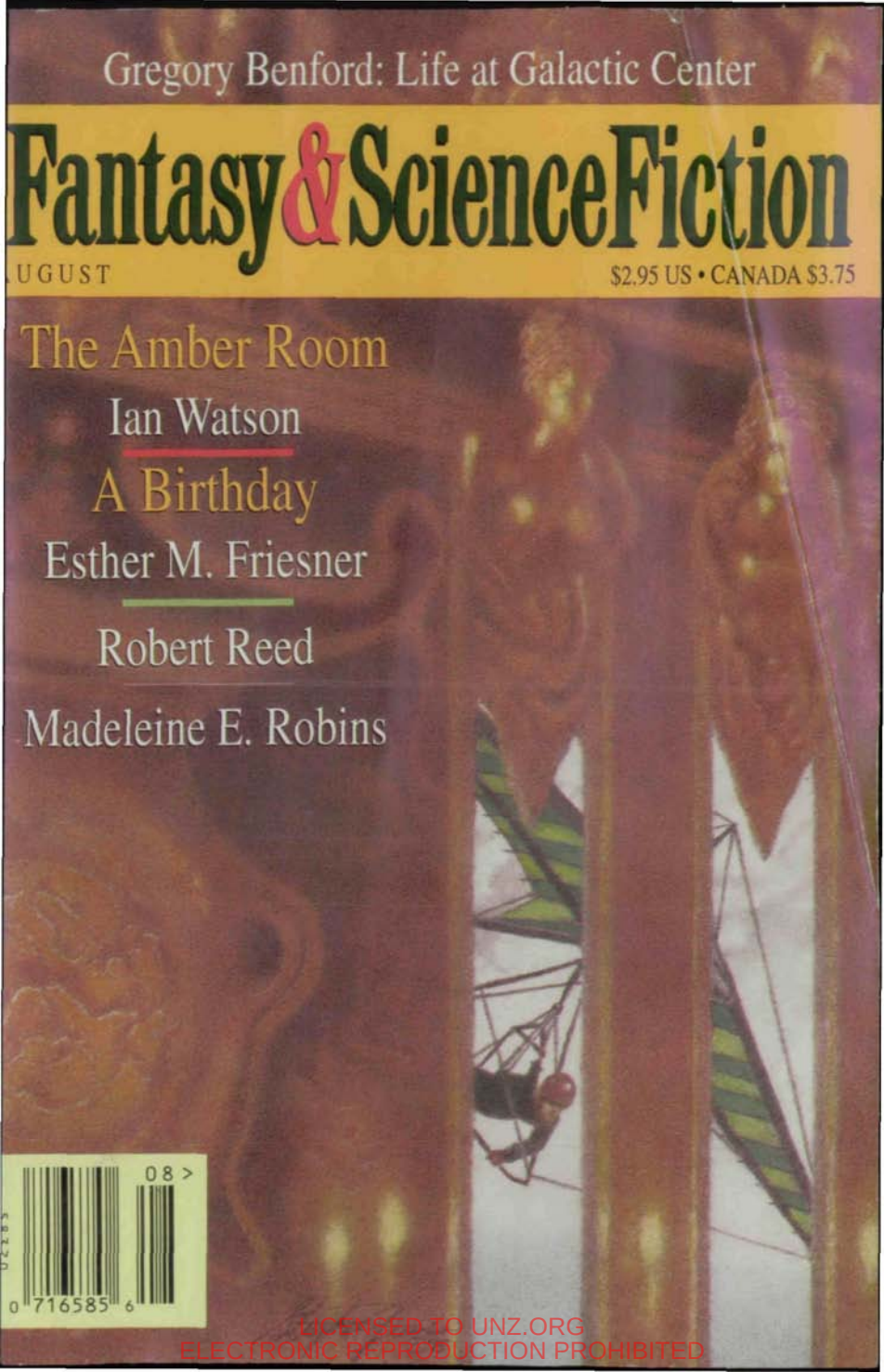

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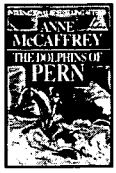

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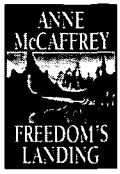

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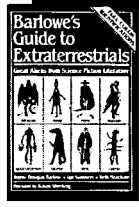

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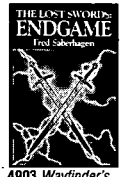

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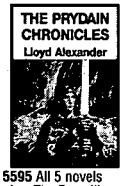

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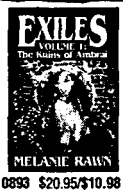

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

LAST WEEK, I was scouting the aisles at the local Barnes and Noble when I heard a young boy's voice speaking loudly.

"...and I wanna get the first one and the second one and the third one because I liked all of them that I got so far. Have you read any? They're really good. And I'm going to collect all of them, every one of them, and I won't lend them out because I did that once and the kid didn't give them back...."

I crept around the Bargain Books until I reached the cash registers. There, a harried looking woman wrote a check while her nine-year-old son clutched three R.L. Stine books to his chest. A stack of five R.L. Stines sat on the counter, and the boy kept touching them as he spoke. No one was really listening to him except me. He was clearly very excited, but his mother and the sales clerk were busy with the purchase.

"I bet R.L. Stine can afford to send *his* children to college," the mother said as she handed the check to the sales clerk.

The sales clerk nodded. The boy asked again if he could have the remaining five books, and his mother explained the concept of layaway to him in a tone that showed she had explained this before. Then they left, the boy still nattering happily about all the R.L. Stine books he was going to collect.

I started toward the counter when a black, blue, and white streak nearly knocked me over. Another little boy, about the same age as the first, stood on his tiptoes and slapped an R.L. Stine book on the counter. He handed the clerk a crumpled five dollar bill. As she gave him the change, she tried to engage him in conversation. But he said nothing; he was already reading as he ran out the door.

As I walked toward the counter, I remembered the last time I had seen a young boy and R.L. Stine books. A month before, I had been in Powell's Bookstore in Portland, Oregon (a city

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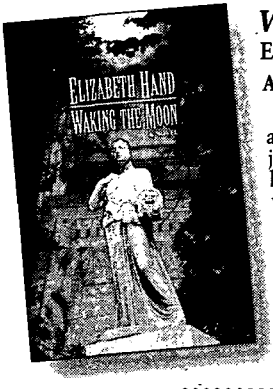

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Elizabeth Hand

A Hand-made tale from the author:

"In a way, *WAKING THE MOON* is a sort of alternative autobiography: my life, if my two best friends from university had just happened to be incarnations of the Dark Goddess and her beautiful doomed consort. It's about what it was like to be eighteen years old when that first Patti Smith album came out — but it's also about what it's like to be twenty years older, looking back down a dark tunnel and wondering if you've blown all your chances for magic and passion and love. As much as anything, *WAKING THE MOON* is about how Sweeney Cassidy gets a second chance at all those things — if the Dark Goddess doesn't kill her first."

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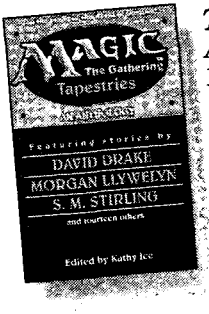

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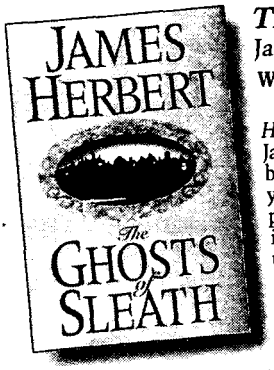

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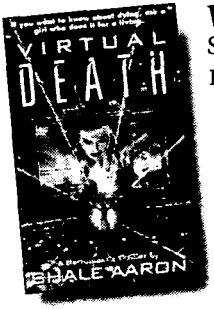

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Shale Aaron

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block of books!) and the boy ahead of me in line was balancing about fifty very thin books between his chin and his hands. His mother had her credit card out and was grinning as she said to the clerk, "I told him he could buy as many as he could carry."

With that memory in mind, I decided to start an investigation into R.L. Stine. I don't have children. I am often oblivious to the latest hot thing. I asked the sales clerk if I had just witnessed a fluke or a fad. She looked at me as if I had just climbed out of an isolation chamber.

"We ordered 76 copies of the latest in the Goosebumps Series," she said, "and sold out in a week. We just got our reorder of 50 and those will be gone by tomorrow."

Her statistics are not a fluke. According to *Publisher's Weekly*, the Goosebumps series (which is aimed at the 9-12-year-old age group) accounted for 13 of the 15 paperback frontlist spots on the children's bestseller lists in 1994. (It also accounted for 13 of the 15 paperback backlist spots.) Since the series debuted in 1993, it has sold 13,880,000 copies (or over 500,000 copies *per novel*).

Children are reading. Goosebumps appeals to both boys and girls in the target age group, and for older children, Stine has another series called Fear Street. It's not quite the same phenomenon — only 4 million copies sold to date — but the numbers are impressive enough to make R.L. Stine the hottest writer in America today. He's hotter than John Grisham, Stephen King, and Danielle Steele.

But the important point is that R.L. Stine writes genre fiction. His genre happens to be the same as ours. His novels range from horror to dark fantasy to suspense.

The informative sales clerk also told me that "it's too bad kids are reading Stine. They don't learn anything from the books."

I was intrigued enough by the children's enthusiasm and by the clerk's comments to buy a pile of R.L. Stine books myself. Last Saturday — a blustery rainy day — I had a cold (the annoying version that saps energy and makes me long for chicken soup). I figured I couldn't get any closer to feeling like a kid (except, of course, when I do something exceedingly fun like cannon balls off a high dive), so I stretched out on the couch, pulled up a blanket, and read R.L. Stine.

I had several shocks. First, I enjoyed myself. The books read quickly and scared me in a number of places. Second, I found myself wanting to read more. And third, Stine did things I didn't expect — he kidnapped parents (the kids rescued them, of course); he

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killed a dog (but it became a zombie so it was still mobile); he menaced kids at a deserted house (and let one teenager die!). The blood and violence were offstage, however. The ghosts, zombies, phantoms, and witches I encountered were tough and scary—and all defeated by the ingenuity of the protagonists. (Stine writes most of the novels in comfy first person to provide a subconscious reassurance that the narrator will live.)

I would give R.L. Stine novels to my children. True, the books are horror, but they contain fears I remember from my childhood. *Welcome to Dead House*, the first book in Goosebumps, deals with the terrors of moving to a new place. *Missing*, a Fear Street novel, focuses on parents who mysteriously disappear. The events in *Phantom of the Auditorium*, a recent Goosebumps novel, would never have happened if the grown-ups had listened to the kids. Stine is in touch and in tune with that child part of himself, and he explores it with gusto.

The endings are all upbeat: the kids get to move back to their old home; the parents get rescued by their children; and the poor phantom gets laid to rest. The books make kids examine the boogeymen hidden in the closet and then turn on the light as reassurance.

I spoke with a few parents and some children's book writers about Stine. The parents complained about the cost of the books ($3.50), and the book writers complained that Stine's novels make no sense. (In *Welcome to Dead House*, the zombies go around in the daytime in the front half of the book and at the end are killed because they cannot go out into the sunlight.) The parents are dealing with the money situation: layaway, making the children pay from their allowances, or having the child buy as many books as he can carry. The fact that parts of the novels make no sense should bother me on an editorial basis, but it doesn't. The stories are rollicking good fun, scary in a non-threatening way, and different enough so that I didn't feel as if I were reading the same book over and over again.

My concern comes from two places. First, the assumption of the sales clerk angered me. When she mentioned that children "don't learn anything" from these books, I snapped at her (in a voice loud enough to turn the heads of nearby customers), "I think children learn a lot from Stine. They learn to enjoy reading." She tried to argue with me that children should learn more than that until I reminded her that much of the population in this country is functionally illiterate. What children are reading matters less than the fact

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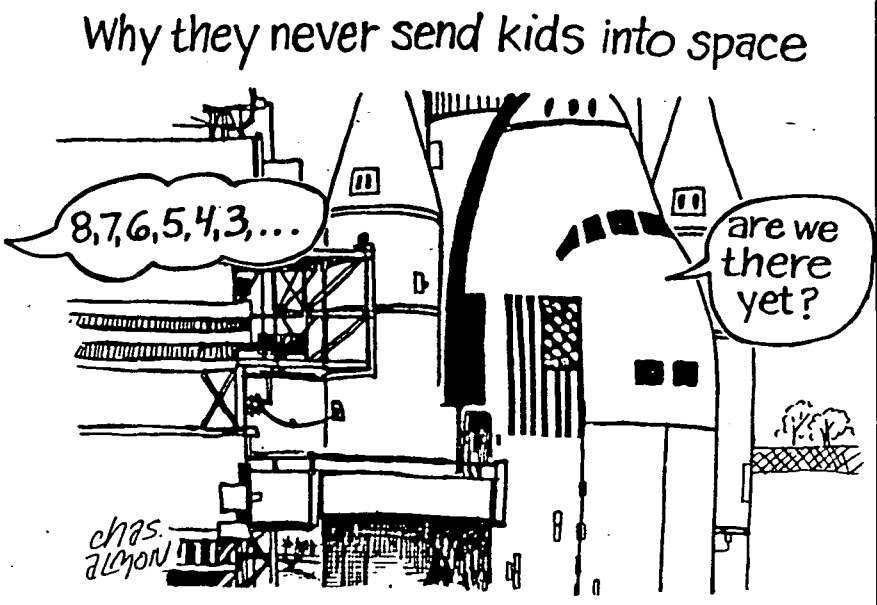
that they are reading and enjoying what they read. They will continue to read in adulthood, if they can continue to find books they like.

That's where I come in. I have to find a way to lure these readers to *F&SF*. Not gear the contents toward children, but to have stories here that these Stine fans will like when they are ready to move on. My colleagues at the publishing houses and the other fiction magazines need to do the same.

Does that mean we should buy horror exclusively? Of course not. It means we have to remember that a rollicking good story is twice as important as learning something from the text. Fiction is about adventure, excitement, and exploring ourselves. R.L. Stine has captured those elements. It's time we — the editors and writers — follow his lead.

Today someone asked me the last time I got excited about a series of books. I would have had trouble answering the question a week ago. I had no trouble now. As I answered the question, I found myself gushing like the little boy in Barnes and Noble — about R.L. Stine.



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Sometimes fiction forces us to look at things in a new light. Science fiction in particular can examine ancient beliefs and remake them — and not always to our liking.

Pamela D. Hodgson attended Clarion Writers Workshop in 1992. Since then she has sold several stories to Amazing Stories, Pulphouse, *and various anthologies. "The Canterbury Path" is her first appearance in* The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.

The Canterbury Path

By Pamela D. Hodgson

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ANGLICAN Catholic History, Volume 3: Elisabeth Altgeld, Anglican missionary, born 2111, Illinois, Earth, ordained 2137 (before the Anglican-Roman Compact of 2183 ended female ordination in exchange for limitation of powers of the papacy; see article Vol.1). Credited with bringing Christianity to the Magellanic planets; little is known of her specific activities, except that she spent most of her career on Kputkp, where she died in 2150, possibly due to the famine of that year.

The insectile alien joined the group of Canterbury pilgrims, as the tourists liked to be called, just before the tour reached the Martyrdom. The creature was black, standing upright on two bug legs, with a ring of flexible appendages, more gray than black, around its middle. The head had a maw of sorts, and what were presumably eyes — two round, spongy lumps on the sides of a bullet-shaped head. From its neck hung a wooden crucifix.

Father George Morville nodded recognition at the alien, reluctantly, and went on giving the tour, the quaver of age in his voice multiplying in the echo

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off the marble pilasters. "This stone marks the spot of the Martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket, December 29, 1170. All gather 'round, within the range of the stimfield—" humans and others, three dozen in all, drew in closer around him, " — and we'll show you it, let you see and feel it, just as it happened, seventeen hundred and twenty-three solar years ago." He checked his math; yes, 2893 less 1170, that was right. Memory was as bad as his eyesight.

The space around the group wavered, then reshaped itself. Over George's shoulder, the 1184 A.D. choir, with its screen of stone statues, was replaced with Anselm's Norman structure as it must have looked in 1170 when it was only forty years old. Brown-hooded monks, heads deeply bowed, shuffled into the choir, but still circumnavigating the clot of visitors. One of the tourists reached out to tug at a coarse brown sleeve. She looked disappointed when the image didn't react.

George gestured toward the arched stone doorway from the cloister. The tourists turned to watch the silk-coped figure of Archbishop Thomas Becket hurry past them into the transept, darting a glance over his shoulder. Behind them, the murmur of Latin vespers rose like heat toward the vaulted roof. Before Thomas could join the monks, four knights bolted through the door after him, their hard shoes stamping like hooves on the stone floor. The monks' voices rose a little, as if to overcome the profane sound. With one hand Thomas drew his cope tight around him as the knights grabbed for him. With the other he slapped at one of them, a small, dark man with a sharp arch to his brow. "FitzUrse," Thomas said, and the tourists recognized the name from earlier in the tour, though they understood no more of Thomas's guttural, Germanic-sounding old English. Moonlight filtered through the clerestory windows. Thomas and the knights spat sounds at each other, voices rising over the monks', until FitzUrse drew a sword that sliced the air and came down with a crack upon Thomas's head. The Archbishop fell to his knees, whispering the name of Saint Alphege. The sword struck again, harder, and again, until the top of his head fell away like a cap, his skull like a chalice pouring blood on the floor. One knight, who had hung back throughout, a wiry man with a face only just showing age, crossed himself as Thomas's body collapsed. His face was very pale.

A sharp keening wail, like a balloon squirting air, rose and echoed in the transept. George spun to see the alien clutch its shiny black carapace and scurry away, its wail receding along the nave. He shut off the stimfield.

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Bloody alien, he thought, then immediately regretted his unkindness. Still, it had been nothing but trouble, and frankly he thought the creature should be excommunicated. So he'd told the Dean of the Cathedral earlier that morning. Of course the Dean, an ambitious young fellow, not even fifty, seldom had time for George Morville. He probably hadn't heard a word.

The tourists chattered amongst themselves, their shrill accents clashing and ricocheting off the Bell Harry Tower. It gave George a headache. One of them tugged at the sleeve of George's well-worn cassock. His eye roved up and down her lithe body, clothed in a fan-pleated bodice and scuffed white leggings. He wondered if she was just as lovely beneath the clothes, just as cool and white and full in the proper places. But she was young, and it was his misfortune to be old. He asked for her question.

"The one who stood back, which one was he?"

"Hugh de Morville. No relation to me, I might add. Never thought it would come to murder when they all left King Henry. Didn't have the stomach for it."

"That Kputkp — " she pronounced it *kip-ut-kip*, jerking her head toward the wailing alien's path of retreat, " — didn't have a stomach for it either!" Most of the humans, and some of the other aliens, laughed. There were no other Kputkp.

The alien's stomach was not something George wanted to be reminded of. He asked if there were other questions.

A humanoid alien — from Kanth, conquered not too long ago in one war or the other, George thought — raised its mittenlike hand. Earth was a museum planet for the history of the human race, but for some reason all these other types wanted to see it too. At least these Kanth weren't so repulsive. "Becket was not a kind man. How is he a saint?"

"The road to salvation is paved with forgiveness," George answered. "The Lord welcomes all who see His light and do His good works in the end." The Kanthian pursed its thin blue-red lips, but didn't say more.

George wound up the tour, pointing the visitors toward the kiosk where Cathedral souvenirs could be purchased. The group dissolved, some responding to his halfhearted sales pitch, the rest setting off to roam the building and grounds. One switched on a retina recorder. George couldn't be bothered to tell him it wasn't allowed. He went outside.

There were smooth stone benches on the green, which visitors seldom

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paused at, given the short time most had to see all the sights of the planet. George lowered himself carefully to a bench in the sun, the cool stone painful against his arthritic back and legs. Perhaps the pain was penitence for his rudeness to the alien. It called itself an ordained priest of the Anglican-Catholic Church. He really should be more accepting.

Called itself. Well, he supposed it really was a priest, by right of apostolic succession. It had been ordained by one of its own, who had in turn been ordained, and back until one of them was first ordained by a Christian missionary from Earth, who had herself been duly ordained and consecrated. Of course, some would question whether any of it counted, the missionary being a woman, ordained before the reunification, when that sort of thing was done.

It had been hard enough bringing the Anglicans and Catholics together. He couldn't see how there was a place under this ecclesiastical roof for the bizarre alien sect this so-called priest from Kputkp had told him about a day before.

He leaned back on the bench and tilted his head up to the gray-blue sky. At least it wasn't raining today.

IT HAD RAINED the day before, off and on, the rush of it outside swallowing the noise of footsteps and voices in the Cathedral.

Perhaps it was strange that the only priest present would be the tour guide. There were plenty of others nearby; the office annex next door housed the Archbishop and the Dean and all their ordained and lay bureaucrats. But an hour after morning prayer, George was the only clergyman in the church itself. He leaned heavily against the visitor information table where the tour groups assembled, waiting to see how many there would be for his 10:15 tour. Money was tight and the current war had cut off a large chunk of the galaxy, so it had been a slow summer. George wasn't troubled. In nearly fifty years at Canterbury, he had seen it all come and go and come again. Next year, or perhaps the year after, would be better. War kept tourism down, but at least it kept his niece Marina in a job.

There was a school group from Mars for the tour. That helped make up the numbers. Also a few old ladies, with the zigzag haircuts that had gone out of style a generation ago. And the nuns — there were always nuns. As the tour was about to begin, the alien scuttled up. George restrained the shudder

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that nonhumanoids always gave him. He thought — correctly — it might be a Kputkp, though contact with their planet had been sporadic at best, they being the other side of the disputed territories. He had seen pictures of them somewhere. Rather surprising it made it here, he thought.

It stopped right in front of George and inclined its head toward him. Its jaws clicked as it spoke. "Are you a priest, sir?"

George fingered his collar. "Yes."

"I would like to talk. To you. A priest."

"I have a tour to lead. I'm sure most of your questions will be answered by the tour."

"Not to talk about this cathedral."

"Well. These people are waiting, and we don't like to be late. Perhaps someone else can help you." George turned away.

The Kputkp joined the tour for the first part, but wandered off halfway through. George breathed a sigh of relief, though he felt bad about doing so. He really shouldn't be so put off.

The alien sidled up to him after the tour. "May I talk with you now, Father?" The clicking of its jaws grated on George's nerves. He looked around. Even the woman who minded the information table was gone.

The alien didn't wait for him to say yes. "I too am a priēst. I am from Kputkp." George looked for a clerical collar, in vain; the creature didn't wear anything he recognized as clothing. "But being so far away...the faith has...lost something in translation. I have come to bring it back."

He waved toward the kiosk against the wall. "There are histories available on retina player over at the — "

"I would like to talk about what you believe."

George started to walk. It saved him having to look the alien in the eye. The alien followed. "It's really all in the creed."

"Why are you a priest if you do not wish to talk about your faith?"

George paused. It was two questions, really, and he wasn't sure he could answer either. He retreated to the earlier question. "I can spare a *few* minutes to talk about doctrine." He gestured toward a pew. "Shall we sit?"

"No, thank you. But you sit please." George realized the alien physique didn't really permit sitting, at least not the way humans did it. But he was tired, so he sat. Rather than crane his neck to look up at the alien, he gazed off into the middle distance.

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The jaw-clicking of the alien's speech quickened; it reminded George of tap-dancing. The rhythm didn't match the cadence of the words, but it complemented the beat of the rain. "Is it true that Jesus Christ was a human being?"

And this thing called itself a priest? George looked at the crucifix dangling against the alien's patent-leather chest. Yes, as he looked closer, the figure on it was...almost insectile.

"Well of course!" It came out louder than he intended. Tourists glared. He drew in a breath before going on. "Christ was man and God in one. This is at the very root of our faith. This is how He saves us all."

"But I am not man. Do you believe Christ died for me?"

George thought a moment. "Yes." That much he was sure of. After a few seconds more, he went on, less certainly. "You are not a man, but you are mortal. *That* is the point."

"But human survival does not require the Sacrifice. How are you in communion with God?"

"I don't understand your question."

The alien produced a retina player — it must have joints or pockets or something that weren't apparent — and offered the scanbox to George. He took it, careful not to touch the appendage that held it. The creature gave him the willies.

He raised the scanbox to his eye and pressed the button. The red laser pulsed once, then was replaced by images that printed themselves on his brain. It was an encyclopedia entry on the Kputkp. The Sacrifice: apparently it meant that the Kputkp gave birth to a first offspring, which they ate to nourish themselves for the birth of ensuing offspring, who were allowed to live. Cannibals! And this — this *thing!* equated that with the Holy Eucharist!

"You eat your own children..."

"So that others might live," the alien answered. "Without that, what do you eat for communion?"

"Bread, of course. And wine."

"How is that the Sacrifice of the Lord, who gave his only Son that others might live?"

That newly familiar clicking sound interrupted his thoughts. He snapped his head up, neck creaking a little, to see the alien standing in the sun near his bench. He looked off over its shoulder.

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"Father, I want to talk again." George thought he detected sadness, though he wondered if Kputkp even had emotions. Could they, who ate their children?

"I really think you should speak with the Dean. He is in charge here."

"I want to talk to you."

There was little he could say to that.

"I came here to learn about Jesus Christ, who lived here in your world. I understand how the Father could let His people kill His Son, because He would eat the flesh, as do we all, to nourish the rest of His children, which are we all. That His Son should be one of you — " the alien lowered its bullet-shaped head, rocking it gently back and forth, " — was a revelation." The jaws clicked like an admonishment.

"We thought it mere coincidence that Christ lived here. Upon learning His human parentage, I thought then that you must be a Christlike people. But I come to your place of worship, the place our missionary founder, Mother Altgeld, came from, and see a vicious, brutal murder. A waste, not a sacrifice." It ended the sentence with a sound like a retch.

"The men who killed Becket were punished for their crime. It's said that they wandered for years before they could find peace and forgiveness."

"They killed a man!"

"Christ offers us all forgiveness. Would you have us *eat* them for their crime?"

"Never. They are profane. Weren't they Christians?"

"Yes, they were. The fight was all about — "

"It does not matter — they are Christians and yet they are murderers. And you, Christian, can recreate it and look at it without revulsion every single day!" The alien's rocking head moved more quickly. After a moment, its entire body began to shudder, and once again it departed abruptly. A breeze lifted its appendages as it went.

George shook his head. He would let the Dean see to it. He reached into his pocket for the letter he had been carrying, that he had been looking forward to all day. He smiled that his niece still carried on the old craft of written language, that he could share that secret language with her, even now that she was grown. He unfolded the page.

"Dear Uncle George," he read. Her lettering was as fine and vertical as the script on the Accord of Winchester floating in preservation liquid inside

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the Cathedral. He remembered showing it to her and explaining about words on paper, how things were recorded and passed on in the days before you could scan information through your eye straight into your brain. She was a child then, new to Earth, her mother having taken a job maintaining the Amazon. The child, Marina, traced her fingers in the air in the forms of the letters, her bright blue eyes wide. George taught her to write then. They'd been writing each other since, despite the time and cost. They did it because each liked holding something the other had recently touched.

"Just a quick note," the letter read. "I'm working this week on designs for settlement buildings on the captured planets. I try to make them beautiful and memorable, like your cathedral. I want us to bring these planets something worthwhile. But what we can fabricate on-ship is pretty limited, so mostly they're just practical. I do my best.

"It's boring as hell out here. I'm not sure hardcopy transfer is being done with any efficiency this far away, so I don't know when you'll get this. Anyway, I 'll write again when I can. Love, Marina."

Marina was fourteen last time she visited him at Canterbury. She was getting tall; she was almost as tall as George. She wore her straight brown hair very short, with bangs that, though neatly trimmed, hung over her eyes to the tip of her nose. He guessed that was how all the kids were wearing their hair. She was sturdier than her mother — Nan was more the willowy type. They sat across from each other at his well-used dining table. Marina was a bright spot in the mustard-colored room.

She fingered the gold cross dangling from a chain around her neck. George had given it to her when she was ten. "Glad to see you still have that," he said.

"I don't wear it much."

He looked down at the wood and began tracing the grain with his fingertip. "I suppose it's not the fashion."

"I don't do things just 'cause everyone else does. I just don't think this cross thing means much."

His finger stopped tracing.

"It *does* mean something that it came from you. But I don't go to church any more." He started to smile at her. "You're gonna say it's a *phase*. It's like I can't think anything without everyone calling it a phase." She twirled a

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strand of her bangs, tugging it mouthward. It wouldn't reach. "I just think there's a problem with religion when it says it's for everyone, but it's more — " She stopped to search for the words, then finished triumphantly. "It's more exclusive than inclusive." George wondered who she was quoting.

"You're thinking too much, child."

Marina sighed. "So according to your church, I'm not supposed to think. Great. Thinking is what separates us from the sheep. So, church is for sheep?"

"It has to do with faith, dear."

She shook her head, but she smiled. "I still like the Cathedral, though. I want to be an architect. Can we go walk around? It's kind of a busman's holiday for you, but..."

Busman's holiday. She'd learned that expression from him.

The alien was back. Last thing he needed.

"I have something for you, Father." One of the limp appendages snaked around another scanbox. George took it. He held it up and pressed the button.

He flinched at first. The images were of aliens, Kputkp, their carapaces reflecting a low-hanging orange sun. They gathered around a small altar, on which rested a chalice, a silver paten and a long ruby skewer. The crowd of aliens parted, and one of them carried forward a small one, even more buglike than its elders. The others rocked their heads as it passed. The small one was set gently in the center of the altar just as another adult, the one that stood before George here in Canterbury — he was surprised to find he could tell one from another — stepped behind the altar, a ragged clerical stole draped over its body. Above it George saw a crucifix: a black metal cross with a figure pinned to it, writhing in agony, that was in no way a man. He dropped the scanbox.

"Continue please," said the alien. It loomed over him, blocking his way, though he doubted the creature would restrain him. He had to confess a certain morbid curiosity. His stomach churned. He brought the box back up to his eye.

The alien priest raised the paten, the chalice, and the ruby blade each in a separate appendage. Then it moved all its appendages, seven he now counted, in unison to trace the shape of a cross. The others did likewise. At last, the blade came down upon the child, the first stroke quick, the others less

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so, but equally deliberate. George flinched with each one. A steamy rust-colored fluid oozed from the rents. The priest collected it in the chalice. George could smell the sick sweetness of death. The Kputkp dissected the body neatly and arranged the pieces on the paten to form the letters alpha and omega.

He closed his eyes long enough to take a deep breath and compose himself. When he opened them, he saw the Kputkp line up for communion. The weakest ones were ushered forth first. Some of them had to be helped. Each devoured hunks of flesh from the plate, curled itself momentarily on the ground in what George took to be a genuflection, took a long drink from the chalice, curled itself again, then returned to the crowd.

The next to eat looked less frail. George thought they looked sad. The rest followed. There were only crumbs left on the plate when the priest ate. He wrapped his maw around the entire chalice and sucked out the remaining drops of blood. George put down the scanbox.

"To each according to his need," the alien said. "There is more." Its appendage, smooth as glass, pressed his hand back up.

A date flashed at the corner of his eye, telling him this was much earlier. There were the Kputkp again, but this time a woman, a human, among them. Mother Altgeld, the missionary, he guessed. Her hair was gold, with a faint tinge of red, her pale brown eyes round and expressive, still beautiful despite the lines spraying out from them.

Mother Altgeld was surrounded by Kputkp, almost all of them thin and weak. "The famine," George heard the alien priest say, his voice like an echo. The woman stood in front of a table made of twigs stacked in piles, her voice simulating the sounds of the Kputkp language.

Mother Altgeld climbed onto the altar. She stretched herself out as if to sleep. She crossed herself. The name Mother suited her, he decided. He could imagine her among children.

One of the aliens came forward with the ruby knife. George gasped. Mother Altgeld opened her palm and accepted it from him. Her chest rose and fell with a deep breath. She closed her eyes and plunged the knife into her own chest. George dropped the box. It clattered on the stone path.

The alien picked it up. "Since the martyrdom of Mother Altgeld seven hundred years ago, we've had no wars, no greed. She gave us the example — one must sacrifice for the greater good, even beyond what is normally

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required. The Sacrifice is not just for one's own offspring, and not just for food. Rather than evolutionary necessity, we do it for one another, for the whole. We care for our hungry and our needy, so no one's needs fail to be met. We are truly brothers to one another. This is what Jesus Christ taught, Mother Altgeld said, and so we follow. Is this not what you believe?"

"No wars?"

"None."

"But you didn't have many before, did you?"

"Our population was halved by war just before Mother Altgeld came to us. We were hungry when she came because our crops were decimated by war. Yes, Father, we had wars. Until Mother Altgeld taught us to follow Christ, through her own example." George heard derision. "Now you see why I was so shocked to learn Jesus Christ was one of *you*."

"What do your women say about losing their children to your sacrifices? They can't be — "

"We all reproduce. Since Mother Altgeld's coming, the young that are consecrated are offspring of a priest. Others may offer their young, if they are needed for the greater good. But most are mine, or another priest's."

George shook his gray head. It was too much to think about. The alien held up the scanbox. George raised his hand to reach for it, then changed his mind and let his hand drop in his lap. He gazed down at his veiny pale fingers instead.

When he looked up, the alien had gone. He sighed. He hoisted himself up off the bench, palms flat against its surface. He walked slowly, the only way he could walk many days, back into the great west door. Sunlight slanted through the stained glass; the fat frogs in the miracle windows cast blobs of green on the stone floor.

As he walked, George passed the northwest transept and the martyrdom stone. He stopped to trace the letters with the toe of his shoe. He remembered the stimfield image, the one that had horrified the Kputkp priest, the one he had replayed two or three times a day for nearly fifty years. For the first time, the brutality of it disgusted him.

Something crinkled against his side. The letter in his pocket. He would sooner go home and write Marina than stay here today. He found a curate and arranged for him to take over the day's tours, pleading illness. The young man was kind about it, but George knew that later he would say that it was just

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more proof the old man should be retired, and room made for some new blood, someone not living in the past. Never mind. He took off his cassock and went home.

Home was a flat just across the green, spacious really, considering he lived alone. The furnishings were much as he had found them when he first came to Canterbury: beige and brown chairs that sculpted themselves to the occupant's body, their supposedly indestructible fabric showing the signs of half a century's wear. The building dated from the fifteenth century, so there was a large stone fireplace in the middle of the parlor, remnants of wood and ash in it left from when he last lit it perhaps a year or two ago. He had an old-fashioned scanbox, the great big kind, too heavy to move. It would play the new scans, with full sensory output, but the library of cartridges he had on a shelf nearby were all the very old kind, that read actual text directly into the eye. You could make the images yourself. You could see what you wanted to see.

Marina understood, almost. He extracted her letter, now crumpled, and flattened it in front of him. Marina, with her hair so fine you could hardly feel it when you touched it. Not a pretty girl, by most people's lights, but with a certain brightness behind her eyes that suggested intelligence as well as humor.

He dozed in his chair, the letter still clenched in his paper-white fingers.

He woke in the morning to the bleating of the seephone. It was a moment before he recognized the sound, he used the thing so seldom. Joints stiff, he shuffled to the console. For a moment he wished Museum Earth offered its residents the more modern appliances, like a seephone that came right over to you.

It was Marina's mother, her dark hair partially hidden by a vine-covered hat. She scratched at the corner of her eye. "George. It's about Marina." George waited. "She's dead." Marina's ship had been taken out by a pulse weapon left behind as a sort of land mine in space, she told him.

George stayed in his chair the rest of the morning and into the afternoon, conscious but careless of the stubble on his cheeks, the stale odor of the clothes he had slept in, the pinch of the thick-soled black shoes he'd never bothered to remove. He stared at the wall ahead of him. He remembered telling her that William the Conqueror signed with a cross because he

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couldn't write. She had made a cross with her finger in the air.

He held Marina's letter in his hand, printing it with sweat. The ink faded and ran, and made marks on his fingers. The letters smeared so they couldn't be read, even if you knew how.

The alien didn't announce himself with a knock, didn't wait to be asked in. He just appeared in front of George's chair, back to the fireplace. George looked up at him and said nothing.

"Father, I have heard," he said. "Your human wars come home to you. Do you still have faith?"

George thought for a long moment. He wanted to tell the truth. "Yes."

The chair folded itself around George, reshaping itself like a womb as he sunk deeper inside it. The alien snaked out an appendage and stroked lightly, comfortingly, across his arm.

"How can *you* understand? You lose your children — you kill them yourself! — routinely. You can't possibly understand."

"There is a greater love."

THE MESSAGE from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Primate of the Church of England, came the following morning. George was summoned to a meeting with the Archbishop within the hour. He dressed and hurried as best a man his age could. His eyes were still sore and red.

He paused as he entered through the cloisters near the spot where the alien had run screaming from the tour. The image stuck in him like a dull blade. He wondered for the first time whether Thomas Becket was the appropriate symbol for this place.

The church wasn't open for visitors yet. Though the soles of his shoes were soft, his steps clapped against the stone, against the names of the saints and kings buried beneath the floor and remembered in words chiseled into the surfaces and worn with age, so that many were barely legible and barely recalled.

He paused as he passed the choir screen, his fingers running across the carving. He passed through the screen, up the center aisle flanked by the burnished wood pews, and genuflected before the high altar. He circled left around the sanctuary to the apse at the east that housed the Trinity Chapel.

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Morning light yellowed the air and speckled the floor with the red and gold of the stained glass. George slid into the back pew and lowered himself to the kneeler. His knees cracked as his weight settled on them, and pain trellised up his back.

Head bowed, forehead resting on hands, he prayed for he knew not what. Guidance, he supposed. Answers to the unanswerable: why God made a universe that killed its children, while he, an old, useless man, lived on; where a race that looked like cockroaches could devour their meaty young in the name of the Eucharist and still be better Christians than all of humanity.

They would retire him now, he was sure. He asked the Lord where he would go, where he could be of use. He had been so long at Canterbury, so long a priest in this anachronistic world. But he had been no use. He knew that now.

Yet he wasn't ready to die. He was as afraid as anyone of death. Despite all he had told the dying over his years as a priest, in the final analysis his own faith was wanting. He feared death. He would not go, not yet. Where would he go instead?

He poured out the questions until he had no more, then lifted his head to look for an answer. Instead, he heard the scuttling step of the alien behind him a distance. He raised himself, and turned. The alien rocked its head in acknowledgment. It started to leave, to give him privacy, but he went after it, and it waited for him.

"Just one question, Father," George said to the alien. "I've never asked your name."

"Logosh," or something that sounded like that, was its answer. George nodded and thanked it. The alien continued on its way.

George doddered to the southwest transept and through the door to the office complex, vintage twenty-second century, where he was to meet the Dean and the Archbishop. The bright artificial light, keyed to the wavelength components of natural sunlight, made him see spots. Squinting, he made his way to the giant simulated oak door of the Archbishop's conference room and pushed it open.

The Dean's sharply creased creamy gray trousers showed a single neat wrinkle at the knee where they bent against the eighteenth century walnut chair. His crisp black shirt was like perfect night against the pure white of his collar. White, George noticed for the first time, didn't suit the man. It

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made his fair skin sallow below his graying hair. The archbishop sat at the head of the walnut table, leaning his elbows on the surface scarred with generations of leaning, eating, writing, living. The man was almost as old as George, though with stern, hawkish features and black pinprick eyes. His hair was thick and steely silver, like the silver of the heavy rings on his fingers, and the ornate cross that dangled from his neck, swinging like a corpse at the gallows, tapping lightly against his chest.

George waited to be asked to sit. The Archbishop poked a finger toward a vacant chair across from the Dean. George settled himself into it. The carved back pricked his spine in several places like a medieval torture device. The surface of the table gleamed and reflected. The room smelled faintly of lemon.

The Dean spoke first. "I've conveyed to the Archbishop the information I've recently received regarding the practice of our faith on Kputkp. I told him you were in a position to confirm some of it."

It was not the first time the Dean had taken credit where none was due. George went along, as he always had. "Father Logosh of Kputkp has shared with me some of their customs. He has also showed me how well the gospel is practiced in his world. There are no wars there. No famine. Everyone cares for each other. Our Lord's kingdom has indeed come, in many ways."

The Archbishop drummed his fingers, peering at the Dean rather than George. "I thought you said they performed child sacrifice."

The Dean glared at George. George took it as his cue to answer. "One must understand their culture — "

"Child sacrifice or no?" The Archbishop's cross beat a tattoo on his chest.

"I'm not sure."

"If there is child sacrifice, they'll have to be excommunicated. We can't have them calling themselves part of the Church if they murder babies."

"The question is the greater good, I think. Some must die, that more might be saved."

The Archbishop finally addressed himself directly to George. "Do they kill children?"

"They celebrate the Eucharist, in the way that is true for the people of Kputkp." *Who do you say that I am?* was the question that passed through George's mind.

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"This requires further investigation, don't you think?" the Dean said.

"We don't have anyone we can send that far for so long. We don't even know they'd make it alive."

"I could go."

The Dean and the Archbishop looked at each other. George knew from their expressions that this was an easy solution to a problem they had already discussed. He smiled and went on. "And perhaps Father Logosh would like to stay here, and study the history of the Church. I think you will find him very interesting."

The Archbishop leaned back in his chair, the cross hitting his chest with an impact that wasn't fully absorbed by the cloth of his shirt. "A possibility," he said. When his elbows came up from the table, George knew the interview was at an end. He went home to pack.

Encyclopedia of Anglican Catholic History, Volume 23:

St. George of Kputkp, born George Morville in Bradbury, Mars, July 12, 2812, ordained Canterbury, Museum Earth, April 5, 2833, died Yutp, Kputkp, January 6, 2911, canonized January 6, 2918. Known for his work as a teacher on Kputkp, for bridging the gap between the faith of the non-human planets and the human colonies. He offered himself for martyrdom in the manner of St. Elisabeth Altgeld, whose canonization he championed, as aid to the starving population after a series of planetquakes jeopardized the peaceful civilization of Kputkp. He is also remembered for inspiring the famous pacifist Logosh of Canterbury, who mediated hundreds of wars in his lifetime and brought the gospel to human and non-human cultures throughout the galaxy before being elected Archbishop of Canterbury. Logosh was chiefly responsible for St. George's canonization. No relics of St. George remain, but shrines to his memory are venerated on Kputkp and in the northwest transept of Canterbury Cathedral. His epitaph reads, "He Who Hath Builded The House Hath More Honour Than the House."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Spellkey Trilogy, by Ann Downer, Baen, 1995, 630pp, $4.99 Paperback

I MISSED THIS series when it was first published by Atheneum. And I almost missed it this time around as well, put off by the lackluster title and the horribly generic cover that gives absolutely no indication as to the charm, wit and style of the story that actually unfolds inside. But happily, in the middle of one of those oft-repeated discussions on the sameness and predictability of most high fantasy, a friend of mine pressed this omnibus edition upon me as one of those rare exceptions.

She was right.

The Spellkey begins with some standard archetypes when we meet its two principal characters, a pair of orphans. Caitlin (the wild girl in the wood) is found by a witch and grows up inside an oak tree in the middle of the Weirdwood acquiring witcheries, while Badger (the foundling who is more than he seems) is raised by monks. Circumstances bring the two together and soon they're embarked on a journey in which Badger must deliver Caitlin to a nunnery by the end of the year, or a price will be put on both their heads.

Downer's prose and characters are enchanting and the story (rightly pointed out by one of the cover blurbs) quickly moves into literary territory previously explored by the likes of Diana Wynne Jones as the pair encounter befuddled kings, princesses in towers and tale-telling harpers — all of whom are slightly, and at times, humorously, askew from how we might have expected them to be. Mysterious figures move in the background, shadowing the pair, and in the end they have a confrontation with an ancient evil.

The Glass Salamander continues in a somewhat similar vein, with journeys into the Otherworld, odd circuses and all sorts of marvels and fascinating characters, marked

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mostly by the originality of Downer's take on them all. The delight of these books comes from the warmth Downer holds for her characters and how she conveys it to her readers. The prose remains enchanting throughout and one never knows what to expect, which is such a refreshing change from all those novels where one can predict the entire story after reading the first few chapters.

The only weakness in the first two books is the evil sorcerer Myrrhlock who's cut from rather standard villain cloth. The characters' dealings with him aren't nearly as interesting as how they interact between themselves, and perhaps Downer herself realized this, because once Myrrhlock is dealt with at the end of the second volume, he neither returns (as he did after being defeated in *The Spellkey*) nor is he replaced in the last book.

Instead, the third volume, *The Book of the Keepers*, concentrates on Downer's strengths — her gift of language and characterization — and owes more to the complicated social machinations and manners of Dorothy Dunnett than to high fantasy. There is magic still present, there are still puzzles to work out, enchantments to be discovered, but they are by-products of the ever-more complicated affairs of the characters — which, by this point, is why we're really reading the books.

It's been a long time since I've been this taken by a secondary world series and while I hesitate to lay too weighty a mantle on Downer's shoulders, for fear of raising your expectations to heights where they might be disappointed, on the basis of this trilogy, I have to say that she's one of the freshest and most assured voices I've come across in high fantasy in some time. So kudos to Baen for rescuing this series from its previous obscurity. And I, for one, am eagerly awaiting whatever sort of book Downer decides to give us next.

Vampire Diary: the Embrace, by Robert Weinberg & Mark Rein-Hagen, White Wolf, 1995, 104pp, $14.95, Hardcover.

I've heard this described as being akin to Nick Bantock's *Griffin & Sabine* books, but the differences are more profound than are the similarities. *Vampire Diary: the Embrace* comes as a diary, complete with lock and keys. There are a couple of enclosures — a card from one character, a letter from the diary writer to his brother — but otherwise the action, as it were, takes place upon the pages of the diary — a monologue, as opposed to Bantock's dialogue through the correspondence of two characters.

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For anyone familiar with the vampire mythos, the story breaks no new ground. It embraces a seduction of an innocent, the revelation of a monstrous evil, and a heart-breaking tragedy. The handwritten prose, or voice of the diarist, is fairly straightforward, almost simplistic, but more effective because of its literary limitations. You can believe that the diarist is a young twentysomething viewing the world through a lens of how it relates only to himself.

He works as a bartender, but has aspirations to be an artist, so most of the pages also contain his doodles and sketches. The illustrations are sometimes crudely rendered, evocative at other times, but like the diarist's prose voice, effective and revealing.

While I hesitate in recommending this to the casual reader, mostly because the story itself sheds no new light on an old tale retold, both die-hard vampire enthusiasts and fans of DC's *Vertigo* comics line will no doubt delight in its striking combination of sketchbook and diary.

Armed Memory, by Jim Young, TorBooks, 1995, 256pp, $21.95, Hardcover

Into what a strange, and yet still familiar, near-future Jim Young drops us. The Mental Health Act has been passed, outlawing all artistic endeavors that incorporate violence or horror. Anyone caught reading, say, Stephen King, faces fines of up to $100,000 and two years' imprisonment.

The latest genetic breakthrough is Microding — developed by the fashion industry so that now consumers can change their physical appearance as easily as a suit of clothes. The catch is, you can't take it off again, but that doesn't matter to people who don't want to be plain jones anymore. The hip people are now Elvis and Madonna lookalikes, or have been microded into snake-women, wolfmen and the like.

It's tattooing and body-piercing taken that one step further — all innocent enough and no one gets hurt. Except certain criminal organizations have been kidnapping people and turning them into a kind of hammerhead shark, brainwashing the victims into joining their ranks and so creating an army of killers. The leaders themselves have undergone even more profound changes. Their interests are no longer merely criminal; now they want to rectify an ancient evolutionary mistake, to return us all to that moment before we turned from the sea and became land-dwellers. When the book opens, they

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are involved in a few random killings, but as their numbers grow and the killings continue, fear of them builds rapidly.

Our window into this world is Tim Wandel, a fairly innocent young Midwestern man newly arrived in New York City. His cousin Johnny is one of the leading fashion designers of the microding industry, a man whose designs are always on the cutting edge. When he develops an anti-hammerhead virus and looses it on the world, it brings his company to ruin, kills off or returns many of the hammerheads to their former human forms, and makes the surviving leaders all the more determined to put an end to all land-life.

I haven't appreciated a near-future thriller this much since William Gibson's *Neuromancer* first hit the stands. Like Gibson, Young has created a believable near-future with lots of fascinating detail and no more explanation than is needed. There are no long treatises here — nothing at all to distract from a fast-paced story, but there's a wealth of character development, insight and well-considered extrapolation. There's also a moral lesson at the heart of the book, but Young allows his readers to decide the right and wrong for themselves on their own.

What's always intriguing about this sort of book — if one's willing to accept that something such as Microding could be real — is how plausible Young's speculations are. When one considers the basic amorality of the fashion industry, one can easily see it running with the idea of genetic sculpting without taking into consideration the inevitable consequences. The fashion industry is already responsible for so much pain, suffering and death (if you think I'm overreacting, take a good hard look at the statistics for anorexia nervosa, bulimia or the everyday but very real mental anguish of so many people who don't fit the fashion "ideal") that any dangers inherent in Microding would be conveniently overlooked when measured against the profit margin. At that point, a future as found in *Armed Memory* seems, like Gibson's speculations on Cyberspace, not so much possible as probable.

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Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Weather stories have filled science fiction recently. From John Barnes' novel Mother of Storms *to Bruce Sterling's* Heavy Weather, *the changing climate of these United States and, indeed, the world has riveted us.*

Robert Reed takes the large subject of weather and makes it personal and universal at the same time. He based "Our Prayers Are With You" on last summer's floods in the Midwest (he lives in Lincoln, Nebraska), but this story could just as easily be about this winter's flooding in California...or the next disaster lurking in our near future.

Our Prayers Are With You

By Robert Reed

TODAY IT'S A GERMAN crew, one blond under the camera and the other shoving his microphone at faces, slowing work that never moves fast enough. With a grating tone of false pity, the reporter asks how we are coping with this latest tragedy. Eight centimeters last night, ten or twelve upriver, and do we know that the latest estimate is for a crest almost a meter higher than our levee? He acts exceedingly confident about his math, and miffed beneath everything. Did he come here this morning hoping to find us washed away? Or maybe he wants us to give up, to let the levee fail for him, his camera able to catch the angry brown water charging down our streets. Just like in Tylertown. The CNN crew got that bit of video, and everyone in the world has seen it at least twenty times. Six-plus billion people have seen my sister's house vanish under the flood, and it's been under ever since. Two months ever since. You've seen it. That little white house on the right? With rose bushes and the big blue spruce? Sure you have....

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Anyway, the Germans are working their way toward me. I've slept four hours in the last fifty, living on sweet rolls and ibuprofin, and I'm so tired that I'm shaking. A big strong guy by design, but these sandbags weigh tons and tons. And my mood is past lousy. I'm sick of cameras and the rain, and I'm sick of being worried, and suddenly it occurs to me that I don't have to answer anyone's questions. I don't have to be the noble, suffering flood victim. If I want, I could throw one of these sandbags into the asshole's chest. I could. And besides, I'm thinking, isn't that a clearer answer than anything words can manage?

Only I don't get my chance, as it happens.

What happens is that this fellow two up from me — about the quietest, littlest guy on the levee — detonates when asked, "How do you feel?" He doesn't bother throwing a sandbag, using fists instead, screaming and putting a few good shots into the German's astonished face. It's lovely. Perfect. Sweet. Then I help pull them apart, the German making a fast retreat...and afterward it seems as if everyone on the levee is working harder. Faster. Honesty is everywhere, thicker than river water, and it feels as if it's us against the world. Don't ask me how, but it does.

The rains began last year, but not like this. A record September, but a reasonable record. Then a wet October, a cold dry November, and three months of crippling snow and ice. A winter to remember, we heard. Then a spring thaw that made people around the country notice us. Mountainous ice jams pooled the runoff. The Grand River was plugged up for a week, the Interstate closed and white slabs of ice bulldozing their way through several towns. But the coverage was only national at its height, and then only for a few days. Nobody was killed until an elderly couple drove through barricades and onto a flooded stretch of highway. I watched that drama on television. Live. It was more exciting than any TV fiction, I'll confess. Scuba divers dropped from a helicopter, perching on the sunken car's roof. Genuine heroes, they wrestled the limp bodies out of the cold foam, and only then did I feel a little guilty. I was enjoying the spectacle. Strangers had died, but I felt superior. I was warm and dry, safe inside my own house, and some wicked little part of me enjoyed the tragedy, even wishing for more of the same.

We lose our levee before dark. It's not our sandbags that fail, nor our backs. It's the meat of the levee itself, months of saturation leaving it soft and

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pliable, and porous. Two, three, then four places give way from below, water boiling up, nothing left to do but retreat and curse the luck of it. For just an instant, I consider slipping off to see my house one last time. It's back from the river, on slightly higher ground, and maybe there's hope. For the ten thousandth time, I entertain the image of building a private barricade, saving my property with a single superhuman effort. But one of the painful lessons in a disaster — the lesson that comes as a surprise — is how weak and ineffectual each of us can seem. The difference between human and superhuman is about two rows of sandbags. Which is rarely enough, I've learned. Time after time after time.

In the end, we're trucked to high ground and a refugee camp. Rain begins again, light for the moment. Half a dozen video crews record our stiff climbs out of the trucks. CNN is here, of course. And ANBC. Plus a Japanese crew, and a Russian one. And the Brazilians. Plus a group I don't recognize. Dark little Asians...Indians, maybe?

None of them speak to us. Maybe news of the fistfight has made its way through the ranks. Or maybe even the reporters realize that there aren't any new questions, and the old questions can't clarify what people around the world are seeing. "A ten-thousand-year flood," I hear. "It's official." And I'm thinking: What does that mean? Ten thousand years ago we were coming out of an ice age. Each millennium's weather is unique to itself. And if memory serves, aren't we in a new millennium? Maybe this will be ordinary weather for the next thousand years. Who knows? I know it's not some asshole from CNN, let me tell you.

From the edge of the camp, past the water-soaked tents and prefab shacks, we can see down into the river bottom. We can see the advancing waters. My house is obscured by distance and the strengthening rains, and I'm grateful for the rain now. I keep telling myself that everything of real worth has been removed. Even my major appliances have been pulled out and stored. So why the hell do I feel so lousy?

The Indian crew comes over and sets up.

Only they aren't Indians, I learn. Someone bends close and says, "They're from Bangladesh." Then he repeats himself, for emphasis. "Bangladesh. You know? Where it floods like this every year?"

In accented English, I hear the word, "Tragedy."

The small dark men seem to understand better than the rest, although

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it doesn't stop them from doing their jobs. Their cameras beam home images of destruction and despair, as if to prove to their pitiful homeland that even rich Americans can experience Nature's horrible extremes.

March was wet, but April made March seem dry. In memory.

Then came May, which was easily worse. I remember a puffy-faced weatherman reporting afterward that we had three arguably blue-sky days in all of May. We'd already exceeded our average annual totals in precipitation. But June stayed just as cheerless, just as strange, the jet stream deciding to come over our heads, steady as a highway, delivering Pacific moisture to a band of six midwestern states, every night beginning and ending with barrages of heavy rain and hail and wind and more wind.

My sister's house was lost in June, little warning given. Her family escaped with the proverbial clothes on their backs, and when I last talked to her, she was trying to live with her in-laws in Greendale. Seven people in a trailer, a marriage straining like...well, like every levee image you can devise...and all she said was, "If only the rain would stop. That's all I want. Why is that too much to want?"

At some point — I don't know exactly when — I began to watch every weather forecast with an obsessiveness and a growing frustration. Waking in the middle of the night, I'd flip on my bedroom television and turn to the Weather Channel, waiting for that glimpse of the radar with its map and neat colors and the time-lapse sense of motion. Great glowering red storms would form, then march along until mid-morning. Then the summer sun would lift the humidity, new clouds forming, the sticky remnants of last night's storms seeding fresh ones, the pattern scarcely changing from night to night.

Our city's levee was the best, we heard. Tall and thick, and tough. And our city administrators treated doubters with scorn, as if doubt itself could undermine all the good Federal dollars that went into the long embankment.

By July, the pattern was clear. The worst of the rains fell on a narrow band just upstream from us. Our climate made tropical people wilt. The upstream towns had drowned, and the giant reservoir downstream from us was filled to overflowing. Then it did overflow, the Army Corps of Engineers having no choice but to release the excess water, letting it slide over the top in order to save their fragile earthen dam.

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By then the world was watching us. The Midwest in general, but *us* specifically. Our dramas were featured on every news program, in practically every nation. News teams were dispatched, thousands of technicians and reporters helping to absorb the scarce hotel and motel rooms. For all the reasons people watch tragedies, we were watched. Never before had so many cameras showed so much disaster and to such a large audience. I've heard it claimed that the Third World, full of superstitious people, particularly enjoys the dramatics: These floods are judgments from the gods. Americans have been rich and happy for too long, goes the logic. Too much success leads to misfortune. In other words, we deserve our suffering. I know I feel that way sometimes. I'm not the most religious man, but I keep looking at my life, at my failures, wondering why the Lord is spending so much time and effort trying to drown poor me.

Back in July, someone hired an American Indian — an official shaman — to come and try to dispel the rain clouds with dancing and chants. It was considered an amusing story in New York City; but locally, without exception, people found themselves hoping for the best. Even committed skeptics waited eagerly for some change in the jet stream; and for a couple days without warning, it did swing north, leaving us out from under the worst of the storms. But one Indian wasn't enough, it seemed. That high altitude river of air returned, and August — normally a dry and hot cleansing month — began with tornados and a three inch downpour.

Sixty-two inches by then, which is twice our yearly norm.

Reservoirs full. Fields and downtowns underwater. Every old record made ridiculous, and the nervous and sullen weatherpeople admitted finally that there was no end in sight. Computer models and common sense were no help, it seemed. Perhaps by September things would slacken, they would say. Maybe, maybe. We could always hope.

It rains into the night, hard and then harder.

When I was a boy, I loved rain. Now just the idea of water falling from the sky seems horrible to me. I close my eyes and dream of deserts. Sand is a beautiful concept, particularly when it's baked dry and capable of burning flesh, and I dream of lying naked beneath a fierce blue-blue sky, letting myself broil.

Then I wake and sit up, aching through and through.

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I'm sharing a prefab shack with a couple dozen other people, most of them awake and watching a portable battery-powered TV. The news has a new drama building. The reservoir downstream of us — a tremendous inland sea built by the once god-like Corps — is being assaulted by runoff and its own intense storms. The thunder we hear is just the tip of it. By some predictions, ten inches of cold fresh water will fall in the next hours. And the Corps' spokesman doesn't seem convinced by his optimistic statements. "Ten inches is within our tolerance," he claims, words slurring from a lack of sleep, or maybe a love of drink. "The dam is solid. The excess will drain over the spillway. Yes, there's going to be flooding downstream. We can't prevent flooding now. But the reservoir will stay where it is, unless — "

"Unless?" the reporter interrupts.

Did I say *unless?* he seems to think. He pauses, collecting himself, then tells the world, "A strong wind could be dangerous. If it was big enough, and if it blew from the northwest for a long time...it could start to erode the dam...I suppose..."

"You aren't sure?"

"It's unlikely," says the spokesman, suddenly confident. "It would have to blow at just the right angle...the wrong angle, I mean — "

"How unlikely is unlikely?"

"I wouldn't know how to calculate such a tiny number." The tired, possibly drunken face seems unable to calculate anything just now. "Really, I don't think there's much else I can tell you."

That concludes the interview, and the reporter says, "Well, our prayers are with you."

Meaning what? I ask myself.

We hope the rains stop? Or is he saying, *We hope you don't look like an idiot in the morning?*

I REMEMBER ONE night — a sleepless thundering Weather Channel night — when I watched one of the multitude of documentaries produced in the last months. Why is weather so difficult to forecast? One grinning meteorologist spoke of chaos and butterflies. No, not butterflies. Butterfly effects, wasn't it? He told me how tiny, tiny events can precipitate into weather fronts and typhoons. Or have no effect, for that matter. No amount

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of calculating power can predict which tiny events will have what impact. And to illustrate, the grinning man waved his hand in the air, saying, "For all I know, this is making a disturbance that will circle the globe and flatten Tulsa with a tornado. Though it probably won't. Almost certainly won't." A shrug of his shoulders. Doing what kinds of harm? "Minuscule events can lead to massive consequences. That much we do know." A flash of teeth. "Isn't that interesting to consider?"

Moments after the interview ends, as if with some cosmic signal, we hear the wind begin to rise. To strengthen.

It flows sideways over our shack, making the walls and roof creak and shift. Its direction is obvious. Ominous. And not too much later, every network interrupts its late-night programming to bring news from the reservoir. Camera crews are sprinkled along the dam's crest. Already the waves are striking at the rock-faced shoreline, each larger than the one before it, foam and compressed air clawing at the rocks, then reaching higher, finding softer materials already weakened by months of pressure and angry water.

I don't want this to happen. I want it to stop.

Yet what does one opinion have behind it? Nothing, that's what. And besides, am I at risk? This is like watching those old people drowning last spring: a gruesome part of me is thrilled, wondering how it will look, millions and billions of gallons racing downstream in a great apocalyptic wall, mud and cities carried along with the dead....

That's what happens now.

As we watch — as the world sits spellbound — those wind-driven waves find a deadly flaw. Earth slumps, then vanishes. The CNN crew watches a new channel being created, a new spillway equaling the first spillway, then exceeding it.

In a matter of minutes, the dam is ruined. Useless.

The camera crew retreats, in panic, leaving their equipment to fend for itself. And before dawn, every city for a thousand miles downstream is being partially abandoned, and even New Orleans is filling sandbags.

In case.

The reporters abandon our camp before dawn, better mud needing their attentions. The largest dam failure in history is certain to kill hundreds,

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possibly thousands. The Corps spokesman from last night is one of the first casualties. A self-inflicted gunshot wound, we hear. And as I absorb the news, without warning, some inner voice says to me:

"He deserves death. It's his fault, after all."

But why?

"You know why."

Maybe it's exhaustion, but my answer feels reasonable. Maybe the months of worry and work have ruined me, tearing away a thousand years of civilization, but I can't help thinking that the answer couldn't be more obvious.

"Tiny events cause storms," I tell my shack companions. My fellow refugees. "What if? What if the human spirit can influence tiny events? What if six billion people can focus their attentions, their psychic energies — call them whatever you want — and that's how we can manipulate weather fronts and jet streams? What happens then?"

Nobody speaks.

Sleepless, half-dead faces gaze at me, nothing in them to read.

I give an impromptu lecture on chaos theory and butterfly wings, then conclude by asking, "When have so many people in so many places been able to think about one place? In real time, I mean. As events happen. I mean, if there is some magic — call it magic — then isn't this the time when we'd see it? The world is wired together, cameras everywhere. Maybe there's some way, some innate wish-fulfilling trick, that allows us to make the atmosphere move just so, bringing us *this*..."

I pause, all at once doubtful.

And I confess, "I'm nuts. I know."

But someone responds, "No, wait. What about last night's wind? It had to be a perfect wind. Isn't that what the Colonel said? And wasn't it just minutes later when it started blowing — ?"

"Yeah," someone shouts. "That's how it was. It was."

I feel ashamed, my companions infected with my insanity. We're in the Dark Ages. We have fallen so far that we'll believe every unlikely and horrible set of half-ideas.

"They want us to drown," says someone.

"Who does?" whispers a skeptic.

But before names are mentioned, someone else offers, "They don't know they're doing it. How could they know?"

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"So how do we protect ourselves?" asks someone in back. An enraged, crimson voice. "Suppose it's true. How can we stop people from doing this to us, intentionally or not?"

Except for the patter of rain on the roof, the silence is perfect.

I pray for reason, regretting my mouth. But what's one prayer against the will of multitudes?

An Irish journalist is found shot to death in a flooded sorghum field.

Two Nigerian cameramen are hung with their own coaxial cable, the incident interpreted as being racially motivated.

In one day, three different news vehicles are peppered with small arms fire.

And while I'm busy wondering about these terrible deeds, and am I in some way to blame, a bizarre new terrorist group bombs radar towers over a wide region, leaving the soggy heart of the nation blank, no way to determine the course and intensity of the latest storms.

Which aren't so bad, as it happens.

The truly bad news has moved downstream, taking most of the press with it. September begins with a week of uninterrupted sunshine. The lower Mississippi valley is submerged, but by October we've seen the last of our dirty waters roll off our streets and through the empty reservoir. We aren't dry, but the concept of dry ground can at least be imagined now. We can't hope for anything more.

Of course the murders were just murders, I tell myself.

Ugly but simple in their intent.

And who knows why people would dynamite radar installations? It has nothing to do with me.

And yet.

I find myself thinking about the people in my shack and how they must have spoken to friends and strangers, telling them of my idea. Ideas are like butterfly wings. Small beginnings; catastrophic results. An idea like mine could flow through a population, seeking out the people most likely to believe in it. To act on it. To do what feels like the logical best course.

Make the world forget us.

Which it has, mostly.

* * *

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A late-season hurricane strengthens, then takes aim at the Gulf Coast, flooding the remnants of New Orleans and shifting the Mississippi to a new channel in western Louisiana.

Eighty-three acts of terrorism against reporters and weatherpeople may or may not be linked with violence during last summer's floods.

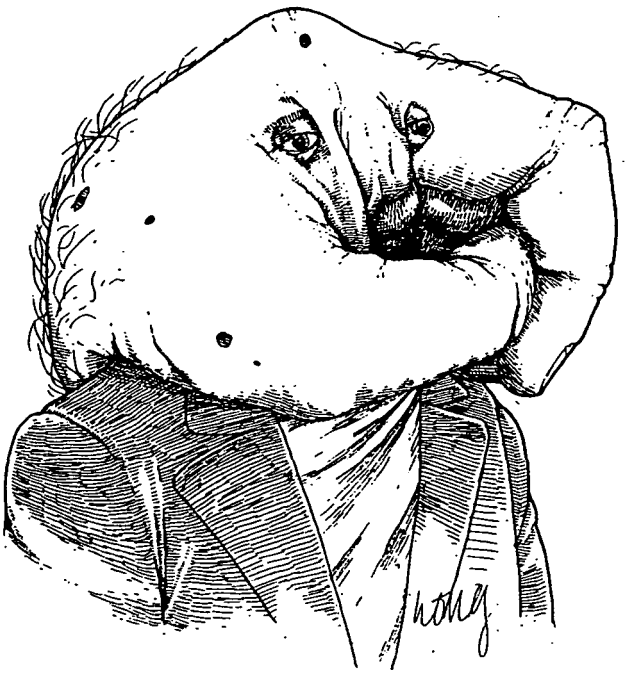
"Frustrations are mounting," one CNN warrior reports to the world.

Armed guards standing around him.

What happens if the world realizes its power? I ask myself. Will humanity shatter into opposing camps? Or seek revenge on its enemies? Or perhaps, just perhaps, create an Eden, tepid and green?

I can remember when weather was a god unto itself.

Obeying no one.



MEDICAL CURIOSITIES pl. IV

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If we are going to examine flood, we must also explore heat. Killing heat, the unrelenting burning heat that adheres to the skin, changes behavior, and destroys every living thing in its path.

"Dry Heat" captures a drought perfectly. It also marks Raymond Steiber's first appearance in F&SF.

Dry August

By Raymond Steiber

THE HEAT LAY WEIGHTED and immobile on every square inch of skin. It drew the air out of the lungs and only grudgingly gave some of it back. Out beyond the hood of the moving car waves of it rose from the pavement like an undulating barrier.

Sim was driving and now he glanced over at George in the passenger seat. He sat there with his big hands in his lap, his mouth gaping, the thin blond hair on his scalp plastered with sweat. Last night there had been heat lightning out on the horizon, but never any rain, never any rain for a month now, and he'd told Sim: "He's out there. He's out there sprinkling lightning bolts across the land." And Sim, thin and dry as August, had said: "George, it ain't nothing out there but the weather." And George had answered, "No, Uncle Sim, it's the weather *man*." Sim had started to answer him, then given up. A forty-three-year-old nephew, his brain gone south — what could you do with him? So he had simply looked out over the darkened fields of wheat,

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threatened on the one hand by drought and on the other by the possibility of a storm.

After a while he'd said: "We'll drive into Jefferson tomorrow afternoon and get ready to pick up your mother from the bus. She don't get in till Wednesday, but we'll stay overnight, maybe take in a movie. How'd you like that, George?"

"I'd like it fine, but it won't get rid of that old weather man."

Just those three, the uncle, his sister, her son, living in the old white-frame farm house. It was company, Sim thought, and old and lonely as he was, he was grateful for it. He was even grateful for George.

Now they drove through the oppressive heat toward Jefferson, and George sat there, seemingly without a thought in his head. Sim wondered sometimes, What goes on inside him? Does he remember *them* — his family? The boy — why the hell am I thinking of him as a boy, he's over forty — the boy never smiles. There's a deep melancholy river that runs through him, and he may not even know its source.

George staring through the windshield. George breathing shallowly through an open mouth. George with that great sad face and those eyes like a basset hound's.

Sim said: "When we get to Jefferson, we'll check into the motel and then go get some fried chicken at Tull's." He was trying to cheer him somehow though he knew he never would.

"That'll be fine," George said.

"I know you like fried chicken. You always liked it. Why, May — "

He shut his mouth. Why had he brought up May?

"The weather man got her, Uncle Sim."

Sim gripped the sweaty steering wheel.

"He got Marjorie, too. And then that thing he sent at the house, that black twisty thing he took out of his old black leather bag, it ripped everything to flinders."

"George, I — "

"They say one of them flinders hit me in the head. That that's why I'm like I am nowadays, but that ain't what happened. The weather man did it. He did it deliberate. Then he left me for dead. He didn't want me to tell anybody I'd seen him. He didn't want his secret let out."

"George, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

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"I was all right before that, wasn't I, Uncle Sim? You knew me then. I could think like anybody else and I was working Dad's old farm and I was doing just fine. That's the way it was, wasn't it?"

"You were a born farmer, George. You could sniff a handful of soil and tell just how good it was and what for. You still got some of that in you."

"The weather man didn't take that away. But he took everything else away."

A tear rolled out of George's eye. He seemed unconscious of it.

"May. I can't remember what May was. Was she my wife, Uncle Sim?"

Sim nodded dumbly, unable to speak.

"What must I have been then? To have a wife, I mean. Why, even you never had a wife, Uncle Sim."

"I was too dry and sour for one, George. And too homely. If I ever could've got one though, I would've wanted her to be just like May."

"Like wheat in sunshine, that's the way her hair looked. Or maybe I just said that to her sometime, trying to impress her. Would I have done something like that, Uncle Sim?"

"Back then you would. You had that way about you that you got from your father."

"And then that old weather man came along and took it all away from me. Such a little man to cause so much harm."

Don't let him mention the child, Sim thought. Don't let him remember crawling through the debris with blood in his eyes and finding her broken body. Spare me that one today, there's already enough misery in my life.

George's mind shifted again.

"I sure look forward to that fried chicken at Tull's," he said. And then he lapsed into silence without his face ever having changed its melancholy cast.

They put up at a motel on the edge of town just off the interstate. Behind it fields of wheat and corn stretched away without a break to the horizon.

The double-bedded room seemed luxury enough compared to the farm house, yet Sim missed his rocking chair and the view off the front porch and his last pipe there at nightfall. George sat at the foot of the bed and watched some kiddy show on the room television, his face so serious that you would have thought it was a lecture in nuclear physics.

Around six-thirty they got dressed and drove over to Tull's. It was an old family restaurant with checkered tablecloths and fresh-faced high school

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girls to serve you. There were always kids in there, always some young mother trying to eat with one hand while she soothed an infant with the other. And across from her there'd be dad and a slightly older kid, slathering butter on hot rolls and putting them away like they were caramels.

Sim liked it. He liked the grandpas and grandmas and sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters at the longer tables. It made him sad though to be sitting there with his nephew George and not be one of them, the grandpa maybe with a rich life behind him.

Besides themselves there was only one other person who wasn't with a family. He sat at a table behind George, and he wore a black suit and a black vest and a black tie. Sim found himself wondering what his profession might be. Undertaker, he thought. Or maybe hangman.

The man ate his soup, pausing every once in a while to survey the room and give it a little smile. Once he caught Sim's eye and gave a nod. The man's own eye seemed like that of a crow or a jackdaw, looking out at the world of men from some other, older form of intelligence.

After a while the man finished his soup and picked up his check and headed for the cash register. He had a black valise in his hand, the kind that old-time doctors used to carry. Maybe that's what he is, Sim thought. But more likely he's a drummer.

They ate their hot rolls and fried chicken and corn on the cob and mashed potatoes with gravy. Then they followed up with huge slabs of apple pie a la mode and sat back content — even George for all his melancholy.

"That was good, Uncle Sim."

"If one of them diet ladies on the television could see us now, she'd have us thrown in jail."

When they stepped back outside, the night was hot and still. It seemed to be waiting for something to happen, something fearful and unpleasant, and all their good feelings evaporated into thin air.

George stood stiffly in the restaurant parking lot and gazed off to the northwest where the sky seemed especially black.

"He's here, Uncle Sim. He followed us from the farm."

"Who's here?" Sim asked, already knowing the answer.

"That old weather man."

"Let's get back to the motel, George."

He took him by the arm and walked him over to the car and got him in

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the front seat. All the way back to the motel George kept turning his head and staring off to the northwest. This was about the time of year it happened, Sim thought. His nerves remember and it makes him edgy.

Sim tried to get George's mind off it.

"Want to run over to the movie theater?"

"I don't feel like it, Uncle Sim."

"It'll take your mind off things."

George turned and stared at him. "That's just what I don't want, Uncle Sim. Maybe I can catch him this time. Maybe I can stop him just once. Then maybe he'll think twice about doing it again."

"Dammit, George — "

"Somebody's got to do it. Somebody's got to do it just once."

"You're not the man, George."

"That's what I'm afraid of, Uncle Sim."

Sim got him back to the motel and took him to their room and put him to bed with the television for company. Maybe his mother could handle him when she came in on the bus tomorrow. Maybe she could dilute his melancholy some.

He got his pipe and tobacco and went out back of the motel where there was a little bit of lawn. The field of wheat came right up to it, separated only by a wire fence.

Sim stood there and smoked his pipe and gazed off into the darkness. The night had become more and more oppressive.

"Do you think it'll rain?" a voice said behind him.

He spun around. The little man from the restaurant was there. He still had the doctor's valise in his hand, but now he wore a hat. Sim thought it was a bowler — something you only saw in old movies and photographs.

"It may rain," Sim said.

The man smiled enigmatically. "Yes. Yes, I believe it will." He was silent a moment, then he said: "It's been a long time since I've been in these parts. I should've known they'd put a town along that meandering little river."

"Why, this town's been here a hundred years or more."

"Has it? Has it now? How time flies."

Sim laughed nervously. A joker, he thought, and yet it hadn't sounded like a joke. "What trade are you in?" he asked.

"Oh I'm a traveling man."

"What exactly do you sell?"

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"Sell? I don't sell anything. I give little demonstrations of what I can do. Why, I gave a little demonstration over in Centralia just last week. Of course, one day the home office will come through and show people what really can be done. They've been preparing it a long time. Biding their time so to speak."

"I'm not getting your drift, stranger."

"Aren't you? Well. Let's just say my particular line of business is a little hard to describe. And yours?"

"I'm just a farmer."

The man smiled. "Ah."

"It's an honest profession."

"I didn't say it wasn't. Rather risky though, wouldn't you say — what with the weather and all?"

"The weather can do a man in all right."

The man smiled again. "I quite agree," he said.

They stood there without speaking and all around them everything seemed still as death — even the traffic on the interstate.

"I must be off," the man said at last. "I have some samples I need to deliver tonight."

"Kind of late, aint it?"

"Oh late's just fine. It's the best time of all, in fact."

And then he tipped his bowler and ambled away into the darkness.

Sim stared after him a moment, then tapped out his pipe and headed back toward the motel. There was a pale face at one of the second story windows. It was George's, and all at once it disappeared.

Sim walked back into the motel building, something making him hurry his steps. He reached the bottom of the stairs, then found himself running breathlessly up them. When he got to their room, the door was partway open. He stepped inside. No sign of George. No sign of the clothes he'd worn either or his shoes.

Sim crossed to the window. He flung back the drapes. The lawn below was empty, but far out in the wheat next door he sensed something moving.

George, he thought. What the hell's got into you?

He hesitated a moment longer, then headed for the door. As he reached the top of the stairs, an unexpected quiver of fear ran through him.

* * *

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George followed his trampled trail through the wheat field. He didn't think the terrible little man knew he was behind him, but you never could tell. He might be leading him on, wanting to finish the thing he'd started the day he'd killed May and Marjorie. Shut him up forever. Keep George from telling about him although he needn't have bothered since nobody believed him anyway.

That bowler hat — he'd remembered that all right.

And then he'd seen him back of the motel with that valise of his — talking to Uncle Sim of all people. Was Uncle Sim in with him somehow? No, he couldn't believe that. Sim was like everyone else. He thought the weather was just, well, weather.

That little man in the bowler hat. All the trouble he'd caused. All the heartbreak and suffering. Those black twisting beasts he carried in his bag — they'd be bumping around right now, anxious to be out. That was why the air was so still. It sensed them coming and was afraid.

A fragment of breeze swept across the wheat field. Its cool fingers touched his face like a blind man trying to identify one of the sighted. I've got to hurry, he thought. He's getting ready. Soon he'll let one of those things out and it'll turn everything to flinders.

The breeze rose some more, roiling the wheat stalks like wind in water. He could smell the dry soil it raised and the vegetable grit from the wheat. Some of it got in his eyes and blurred them.

He blundered onward. May, May, he thought. Hair the color of wheat in sunlight, like cornsilk under his hand when he crushed her to him. The pink of her cheeks, the way it had spread to her bosom that first time they'd innocently fondled in the back seat of the car. Had that really been? Or was it just something his poor fuddled mind had lifted from a TV show or a movie?

And Marjorie — oh God Marjorie! Her broken body cast by the terrible beast among the debris of the house. So pale in the greenish light, hair like cornsilk, too, but plastered now with rain and blood. And her flesh — so icy to the touch — like warmth would never touch it again.

His eyes blurred again, this time not from grit but from awful remembrance.

The wind blew harder. It gusted and shook and sent a quiver through his bones.

All at once he came to a place where the wheat had been flattened in a great arc. And there in the center of the arc the man in the bowler hat crouched beside his valise.

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He looked up once and his eyes flashed green — like the light blink that's sometimes seen at the setting of the sun. George hadn't yet emerged from the standing wheat and he crouched in the wind-whipped darkness. The man in the bowler hat went on with his work as if he hadn't seen him.

He had the valise open and that was where the wind was coming from, pouring out of it in an endless stream. The valise appeared to be filled with little leather bags that bumped around as if they had animals inside them. He selected one, held it up before his eyes, decided it wasn't what he wanted, put it back.

He rummaged some more, took out two or three other bags, put them back also. Each quivered in his hand as if anxious to be free, then bounced around in frustration as he thrust it into the valise. At last he found the one he was looking for. A slow, mean smile curled across his lips.

He slipped the bag into the side pocket of his coat, closed the valise, put it to one side. The wind that had been worrying the wheat field died away to nothing. In the sudden silence that followed George could hear the little bag bumping around in the man's pocket.

He took it out. He pinched the top of it with his thumb and forefinger. He slowly eased the drawstring. The thing knew it was going to get out now. It seemed to be gathering itself for the rush.

He placed the leather bag on the ground. He released his thumb and forefinger. And out it came. A tiny twisting funnel of darkness that seemed to gather an eerie green glow about itself.

The breeze rose up again. It flowed past George's ears into the center of the flattened arc of wheat. That thing was gathering it in from all directions. It was feeding on it. It was growing.

The man drew something that looked like a pointer from his inner coat pocket. He extended it until it was nearly three feet long. Then he began using it on the black twisting funnel, tapping it here and there, making it do what he wanted.

The thing was as high as a man's knee now. George could hear the rushing sound it made — like a big electric fan on high speed. He heard the snap, too, of the little green and yellow sparks of lightning it made.

The beast, he thought. And his knees went soft.

The beast that killed them all.

The wind rushed more quickly past George's ears. The thing was as tall

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as a large man now, as big across as a grizzly bear. It roared with anger and desire. The man strutted around it like a lion tamer, stepping back when it lunged at him, then snapping the stick at it to show it who was boss.

It grew larger still — a raging rhinoceros now, then a *T. rex*. The man remained its strutting master, laughing at the sheer power of the thing he held in check, his awful green eyes flashing with joy.

There were lightning strokes now within the funnel, *real* lightning that sizzled and boomed. The thing flung itself about, towering, the noise of it like an express train, like a dozen express trains. The man threw back his head and roared with laughter.

George was on his hands and knees. His fingers clawed the earth in an effort to keep himself from being blown away. It was going to be like the last time. Only this time it would kill him, too.

"Oh May!" he cried. "*Marjorie!*"

Some force seemed to rise up in him then. A thing almost the size of the loss he had suffered. He rose up, fighting the wind, and lunged across the flattened wheat toward the man in the bowler hat.

The man saw him coming. He made a sweeping gesture with his pointer and an arm of wind seemed to boil out from the twisting funnel. It drove at George and hit him square and sent him rolling to the ground.

He felt his nose crunch and tasted blood in his mouth. But he picked himself up anyway. Another terrific blow from the whirling beast. He was looking straight up at the towering mass of it as he rolled in the dust.

Sim, he thought. Help me.

But there was no Sim. Not here anyway. He'd have to do it alone.

He got himself up on his hands and knees. The man in the bowler hat was dancing around, whipping his pointer like a conductor's baton. The great beast roared and roared, and blinding strokes of energy crackled within its awful funnel. George gathered himself. He lunged. That fool of a man thought he was down for good. That fool of a man was looking the other way. And now George grappled with him.

They crashed to the ground. The pointer broke into a dozen pieces. The man's breath was in his face and it smelled like the ozone after a lightning strike. George closed his hands around the man's throat.

Above them the whirling beast seemed to hesitate. Its master was down and now it was free. But which way should it go? In which direction lay the

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most prey? It suddenly made up its mind, plunging across the wheat field toward the interstate and destroying everything in its path.

The man threw George from him as if he were a child. Then he struck him and George rolled a dozen feet across the flattened wheat.

"You filthy little farm boy!" the man screamed. His eyes flashed green anger. "You've done it now! You let that thing get away before I was ready and now it'll miss just about everything in the town!"

He gathered up his fierce little body and struck again.

George rolled over and over in the dirt.

"I wanted to flatten that town, boy! I wanted to show those people just how feeble and insignificant they are! That's my job! That's my profession! Oh you'll pay, boy! You don't cross me! You don't cross the old weather man!"

His hand darted under the lapel of his coat. George lay there broken and helpless, unable to move. The man's hand came out again crackling with fire. He drew it back as you'd draw back a spear hand and suddenly there was a dancing lightning bolt there. He flung it straight at George's chest.

George screamed as it hit him, and his scream chased off across the field, following the twister into the night.

The tornado caught Sim in the open, but he was able to fling himself into a ditch and survive. It tore the roof off the motel. It killed a mother of four in the parking lot. It ripped up trees and tossed cars around and then fled into the night without hitting the town itself.

Sim worked his way back to the motel as the last of the rain fell. He got a flashlight out of their battered car and returned to the wheat field. It took him a long time to find George's body, but finally the flashlight picked it out, spreadeagled in the mud.

Sim put the beam on his face. The jaw hung slackly open and the empty blue eyes bugged horribly. No melancholy there now. Something worse. Something much worse.

As he turned away, a cold gust of wind struck his cheek. It was like something out of the grave. The weather man, he thought. And shivered in spite of himself.

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We move from land scourged by drought to the rolling ocean. Eric C. Hartlep's "The Seven Beds" is an odd science fiction tale, one that borders on horror.

"The Seven Beds" is Eric's first story in F&SF. *He graduated from the University of Washington's Writing Program in 1990, a member of the program's first class. He has sold several other stories, including some to* Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine. *His first story appeared in* Sports Afield.

The Seven Beds

By Eric C. Hartlep

Advertisements for our school appear in all the better magazines.

Hope is more than the name of our ship.
Hope is the name of your dream.
For your son.
For yourself.

And:

The Hope Pelagic School.
Giving young men discipline,
training and self-assurance.
Giving their parents peace of mind.

I HAVE NEVER KNOWN MY own parents. Unlike most aboard *Hope* I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth, and didn't try to spit one out the first thing. The ads make me laugh when I run across them in Tutor's library; I've learned not to mention them to the other boys, however.

It must be quite a shock to find a copy of *Town & Country* or *Sunset* on your mother's bedside table one afternoon, open to the back pages, with several such advertisements circled.

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How long before you go? Years?

With me it was much different. No parents to worry over me — or plot how to rid themselves of me, in a respectable way. That brings up the question of who is paying for my schooling and why.

I don't know and I don't ask. I like it here and I'm not about to mess things up with a lot of foolish questions.

One thing I do know is how to answer questions to please my teachers. Living in orphanages — while similar, I gather, to being sent away — develops a different mindset, from what I've seen. I do better than most of the better-schooled boys simply because I have a motivation to do so. It upsets them, and I'm ostracized to some degree, but I can take that. Why trade in a free cruise and good food for the luxury of acting spoiled? I don't fancy myself a Holden Caulfield.

The ability to concentrate my energy on any task I'm given has made me a Class I boy. There are rewards, believe me. The top of *Hope*, with its broad roof covering the main deck, is where the Class I boys room. There are not many of us; I should say less than forty. When time allows we sit in lazy groups on deck, discussing the classics, joking, enjoying the sun when we like, taking shade beneath the striped awning if the heat becomes too intense, and when our meals are served us. After the dark, cramped, and landlocked quarters at Oak Tree I can't complain.

Ignacio is another matter. He despairs. Ignacio is my only close friend here. He's far more intelligent than I am, but he doesn't apply himself. I think he wants to fail. That must be why Tutor made us roommates; he hopes my behavior will rub off on Ignacio. I do nothing to dispel that belief, any more than I would break the superstitions of my classmates. For instance, the one against touching the fifty-foot circle in the center of our deck.

Our helicopter, which at other times is parked on the aft deck, lands on our circular pad with officials from whatever countries we are passing at the time — usually about once a week. I came on that helicopter three months ago on a blistering day. Class I boys wearing navy blazers and white slacks gathered before its rotor blades had stopped turning, shading their eyes to see who was inside.

They ignored me as I came down the steps, as most have ever since. Instead they craned their necks for anyone else aboard. I walked past them with my bags to get under the awning. When no one else got off, the boys

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looked at me. They saw nothing that interested them. My clothes were not fine. I don't possess the bearing of their social stratum; I don't look strong or influential.

So they walked away.

All but Ignacio. He has a way of staring. He is small and wiry, not much of a threat in a physical way; but his eyes are piercing.

"Are you my welcoming committee?" I said, trying for a joke.

"Tutor will look after you," he said.

"Who is Tutor?"

"You don't know?" He seemed wary and tipped his red-topped head to one side in a quizzical way.

"No."

"You must have met him. With your parents."

I shook my head.

"You don't sound Texan," he said.

"I'm not." The ship was off the coast of Texas at the time.

"Going to school there, then?"

"No, I flew down last night from Wisconsin."

"You're my new roommate. You came from an orphanage."

"What? How did you know that?"

"I'll go get Tutor. He'll want to see you right away."

"Wait a minute," I said. But it was too late: he disappeared through a doorway and I was alone. Alone except for the helicopter pilot, though soon he left as well. His machine's engine coughed to life, its blades became a blur, and I covered my ears and shut my eyes until the wind and noise had gone away. When I looked up the copter was just a speck receding toward the horizon.

Later, after I had met Tutor and Ignacio showed me our room, the helicopter came back. The other boys walked out to greet it again, while Ignacio took the deck chair beside mine. The copter disgorged a homogeneous group: men in suits, women in suits. They could barely contain their excitement at seeing the Class I boys.

"You don't have to worry, since you're new," Ignacio said. "They won't question you. Or me either."

"What are they here for?" I said.

Ignacio looked amazed. "Were you born under a rock?" he said. "This is a school. Those people are recruiters. What did you expect?"

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I shrugged and felt stupid.

"Well, most of them are," Ignacio said, being more conciliatory. "One will be from the accreditation committee, checking up on conditions. But you never know which. I'll tell you what they will say, if you like. And what will happen. It's always exactly the same. A little play we put on to amuse ourselves."

I stared at him and he smiled the largest smile I have ever seen from him. He knew I didn't believe him. But in time I found he was right about the recruiters. First they ask the same basic questions. Are we well cared for? Well fed? What do we want to become when we reenter the "real" world?

It might seem, hearing those questions repeated every week, we would answer them perfunctorily. But of course we knew better. "You must understand," Tutor always says at breakfast the day they are to arrive. "To those people the questions are of the utmost importance. Please respect that, and answer accordingly."

We nod yes in unison, then return to our meals.

The second round of questions is just as predictable, though more difficult. Our visitors get eager, thirsty looks, and ask probing questions on languages, political science, the arts, computers, psychology, chemistry, physics, higher math. Our school has a strong reputation. They look, we know, for boys with certain qualities. Some represent technical schools; some colleges; some are from corporation looking for a prodigy in, say, computer science: a mind that, with proper training, will give their company the edge in research and development. Perhaps a mind that large doesn't integrate well into so-called normal society; if that is so, the best place to look is on a ship of misfits. I have heard rumors of other ships — some with boys, others only with girls. But I have never seen one.

In any case, once satisfied, the recruiters make notes on their clipboards and prepare to leave.

Then the final round of questions comes. Someone in the group (usually a woman, and probably from the accreditation committee) asks if they can see other boys on other decks. Tutor smiles and says, "Yes, of course you can. But there are six more decks and three hundred boys to see. Do you have time for that?" The woman will hesitate, watching Tutor closely. Suddenly he smiles broadly and says, "Come along then! We have much to see and little time to..."

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And here the helicopter pilot clears his throat. Tutor stops, dismayed. The pilot explains there will not be sufficient fuel to reach land safely if they stay aboard much longer. Because during the interviews *Hope* kept sailing toward its next port of call...

"She was very brave, while it lasted," Ignacio says each time, sarcastically in my ear. "Of course, it is better not to know an unpleasant thing if there is the least chance one might be stuck with it."

This is as much a dig at me as at the woman, because I doubt his stories. Ignacio says he wanders the ship at night while the rest of us sleep, and has told me what he sees. Or claims to have seen. Below the dormitory levels are crews' quarters; this is well known. But also below decks, Ignacio says, is a sort of prison — he calls it The Seven Beds — where violent or subordinate children are caged like animals.

"If that's true," I once said, "why not study harder and get away?"

His answer was not very convincing: "No, my only chance to get away is not to study." That made no sense, so I put it out of my mind.

TUTOR HAS given us our assignments. Mine is to write a five-thousand-word essay on the role of education in "primitive" versus "advanced" societies. Ignacio's assignment is a survey paper on techniques of value in training the incorrigible in an institutionalized setting. He does not relish his subject, and the morning has been a total waste.

Our main library is small, and often too crowded with other boys for good studying. But Tutor has been good to us — to Ignacio and me. He lets us use his private office. It has more books than I have ever seen, and a marvelous view from its huge curving window. We have spread our periodicals on his heavy oak desk. But the view past the bow, where waves shudder and fall into clouds of spray as our ship sails westward, distracts us from our work.

A further distraction is the nonacademic magazines Tutor has. When alone, we pour over the advertisements, seeking familiar faces. Initially I found the small back-page ads the most interesting: Relax at Paradise Island Resort; Sherpa Guides Offer Adventure!; Take the Orient Express to Lake Baikal.

Then one day I saw Ignacio staring at the photo of a woman in an ad for perfume. His pupils expanded and contracted as his eyes flitted over the

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photograph — memorizing, I suspect, the flawless cream skin, red hair and green eyes of the woman, each emphasized by her blazing white dress. After several minutes I shook him by one shoulder and asked what he was doing.

"Searching for my mother," he said, without taking his eyes from the picture.

I ignored that comment at the time. But since, seeing him lapse into trances on several occasions, I too began to search the glossy ads. I look for that combination of triangular chin, aquiline nose, blue eyes, and smooth, pale forehead topped by dark hair to match my own.

Ignacio's interest in features and colors quickly became my own; because of that, I suddenly saw Tutor as a colored man. Before he had been only...Tutor. His features were African, but his skin tone — even his hair tone — was an orangy red. He looked as though someone had sprinkled him all over with ground paprika. Yet Ignacio never seemed willing to turn his curiosity loose on Tutor's appearance. I wonder if he had, would he have seen the resemblance I did between the two of them? Indeed, their features were so similar, they could have been father and son. The only clear differences were age, size, and Ignacio's caramel skin. And their eyes, of course. While Tutor's eyes were chocolate brown, Ignacio's were a ghostly green.

In midafternoon I felt a presence behind us. It was Tutor. When I turned he smiled and came to our desk, the leather soles of his alligator shoes and the rubber tip of his cane creaking as everything does aboard ship. He wore, as always in warm seas, an impeccable white linen suit and a black bow tie. The splotchy red freckles on his face were supplemented by a dappled light that penetrated the weave of his wide straw hat. I assumed he had just been on deck.

"How are your papers coming, my sons?" he said, doffing his hat. He often referred to the boys on board — at least the Class I boys — as "my sons." We, as often, called him "Father."

"Fine, sir," I said. This was in no way true. I had spent the whole morning, as had Ignacio, paging through a stack of magazines, seeking clues to my past. But Tutor took me at my word and turned to my somber friend.

"Ignacio? Are you making progress?"

When Ignacio looked up at Tutor, his face was streaked with tears. This caused such a look to come over Tutor I felt ashamed to see them, and quickly looked out the picture window.

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As I concentrated on the waves crashing against the bow, I heard a small, broken version of Ignacio's voice ask: "Father? Will this be the year that I can leave?"

Tutor said, "Come with me!" in a tone that made me jump involuntarily. But there was something in his voice besides anger. Utter sadness?

Ignacio's chair scraped across the floor as he stood up, and they left me in Tutor's cabin looking out to sea.

An hour before sunset we acquired six more boys. These came by launch, from a gleaming harbor city half hidden by a range of coastal mountains.

A dozen of us stood at the rail of the upper deck. Amesbury, a tall blond with a stout neck, whose jacket always seemed too small on him, said something nobody could make out. His voice was that deep: if he didn't yell you couldn't understand him. Somebody told him to repeat it.

"Portuguese. I said Portuguese."

"Good lord, Amesbury, you can't even see them yet," Takemura said, in a purposely bad imitation of snobby English. "You may have caught their odor, however, with that fine, skyscraping nose of yours."

Amesbury mumbled something that ended with "stupid slant."

We all straightened up quickly when Tutor tapped the railing twice with his cane. He'd come up from the deck below and had Ignacio with him. My smile had no effect on either of them, so I turned my attention to the launch.

Two men aboard her pitched lines that seemed to hang in the air, reluctant to reach us. Yet our crewmen caught them, and tied them securely on deck. The launch raced her engines, churning the water to keep a safe distance away.

"Look at those striped shirts," Takemura said in a stage whisper. "Portuguese. Definitely, positively, Portuguese."

The short boy with glasses standing between us — I think his name is Danvers — said, "Shut up, all right?"

"Yes, sir!" Takemura said, raising a mock salute.

Our crew activated a small crane, lowering a platform to the deck of the launch; there it was piled with boxes, and hoisted back aboard our ship.

Ignacio came up and bumped me. He nodded toward the launch and I noticed one of the boys was in tears. The other five looked at the crying boy

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with a mix of fear and embarrassment, and for a moment no one moved, as though posing for a portrait painter.

"You won't see those six on the top deck anytime soon," Ignacio said quietly. "They'll go straight to the lower decks."

"Well, what of it?" I said. "If they lack the right education, they'll have to work their way up to Class I."

"No, look at their clothes — they're rags. I mean they'll go to the lowest decks; the ones you don't believe in."

"That's right. I don't believe it. Why waste space on boys you can never teach?"

"They're paid to take them."

"It can't be that simple."

"Let me put it this way: if they didn't take them, the recruiters wouldn't be sent aboard. No recruiters, no recruitment. No recruitment, no reputation. No reputation, no *Hope.*"

"Who are they, then?"

"Dissidents. Troublemakers. Whoever they are, they're wanted out of the local prisons."

"I don't believe it."

"That's up to you."

The crane's platform was lowered again, empty. Suddenly a rough looking man came forward. He barked an order at the boys, but the sound of waves and the distance kept me from hearing what he said. Slowly, showing no emotion, the boys stepped onto the platform and were hauled skyward.

Already our crew was untying the launch, edging it out to sea with long poles. Before it had made much headway, a chorus of high-pitched yells turned my attention to our stern. Apparently the crane's mechanism had frozen. There were the boys, swaying eight feet above our aft deck, clutching at the platform's rigging. To get down, all six were compelled to leap to the deck, one after another like sheep. It was a long jump; one turned his ankle badly.

"Christ, I think he broke it," Takemura said.

"No way," Danvers replied. The crane operator hopped down and two other crewmen ran to help.

"That's one less to worry about," Ignacio said, so only I could hear it.

"What do you mean by that?" I said.

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"Why nothing, good and trusting sir." Ignacio had pulled his eyes into a hideous imitation of Takemura doing his imitation of Amesbury. Now he stuck out his teeth. "You no believe me nohow."

"Cut it out," I said.

"So sorry!"

At sunrise we awoke and put on our gym clothes.

Each morning before breakfast the Class I boys march down to the aft deck for calisthenics. These workouts have been my favorite ritual here; they were my least favorite at the orphanage. When Tutor noticed how much I liked them he was pleased. I suppose he thought it signaled a positive change in me — I'd been rather gloomy ashore. But in truth I simply found exercise less strenuous in the open air, with dashes of salt spray cooling my back, than I had in the stuffy, dark gymnasium at Oak Tree.

Ignacio caught up with me on the first landing.

"How are you feeling today?" he said.

I hadn't expected him to talk to me after yesterday. "I'm fine," I said. "How are you?"

"All right."

Takemura and two other boys passed us on the stairs. Takemura held his hands up like puppets facing each other. "And how are you today?" one of Takemura's hands said. "I'm fine; and how are you?" said the other. He dropped his hands. "Really, gentlemen. Such scintillating conversation so early in the morning may damage your brains."

Ignacio and I stopped on the second landing, to let Takemura and his giggling friends go ahead. It was nice to be with my friend and not worry about things — just enjoy the weather and the open spaces. The early light turned the sea, the ship, and our faces a deep red; the light breeze and the sun's warmth felt wonderful.

We said nothing for some time, and I noticed Ignacio was looking at the fantail of the ship. The sunlight tinged its surface the color of blood, and a party of boys was running mops over the metal deck in preparation for our arrival.

"What are you looking at?" I said.

"Nothing. We'd better go down."

We rounded two more landings. Ignacio kept trying to look past a taller

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boy who walked ahead of us; I stood on tiptoes, seeing nothing but seven boys pushing mops.

"No ballet practice until evening, I'm afraid, Sarmington," Tutor said to me. He was bringing the rest of the boys down the stairs. They all laughed. I thought it was funny, too, but Ignacio didn't. His face looked pinched, as though he was about to cry.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Shut up."

"What? Why?"

"Let them pass. Let them get past." He grabbed my elbow and pulled me to the railing.

"Is anything wrong?" Tutor said.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Ignacio?"

"I'm feeling ill."

"You boys go about your business," Tutor said. Those behind him shuffled down the stairs, glancing at us. Then he said to Ignacio, "Should I call the doctor?"

"No. I'll be all right. Just cramps. Sarmington can take me back up."

"You don't mind?" Tutor said.

"Not at all."

"Call for me if he isn't better in half an hour."

"I will."

Tutor went below with the others and I helped Ignacio up the stairs. "Are you feeling better?" I said when he reached the next landing.

"Didn't you see it?"

"See what?"

He stood up and looked out past the stern. "That body in the water."

"You probably saw a shark," I said.

"There was a shark, too."

"They were probably both sharks — after the garbage those boys were pitching overboard."

"No, one was a body. A body in a striped shirt."

"Stop it," I said.

"I saw the shark take him. It swirled, turned upside down and took him by the head."

I closed my eyes and brought my hands up to my ears, but Ignacio caught

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them with his. "It's not possible," I said. "If we took on six prisoners from every country we passed, we'd be overloaded in a month."

"Not every country, or even the same ones every time. Six is unusual. Probably a coup attempt or purges."

"Even so, we couldn't keep them all."

"We don't. They go to other prisons in different countries. This ship is just the go-between. The idea is to get them out of the way, but without killing — without making them martyrs. They just disappear."

"How do you know all this?" When he didn't answer I shook my head.

"Come with me tonight," he said. "Come belowdecks and I will prove it all to you."

AS WE lay in our bunks, rocking slightly with the motion of the ship, I prayed that Ignacio would fall asleep and forget. My prayers were useless. Not knowing if he was asleep — or awake, waiting for me to make the first move — ate into me. I hung my head over the edge of my mattress, whispering his name into the dark below. There was no response. After several minutes I climbed out of bed and found Ignacio gone.

I dressed quietly and opened our door. Barefoot to keep from waking anyone, I stepped into the hall. At the end of our dorm I peered through the small square window into the lighted companionway. The night resident's desk sat deserted. I slipped out and closed the door behind me.

There was not much choice of ways to go. I followed caged overhead bulbs along the metal corridor to the first landing. The stairs leading down were well lit and being seen on them was a real possibility. Though we have no guards on the upper decks — Class I boys are left to our own recognizance — I still might be seen by one patrolling the decks below. I quickly went down one open flight, then ducked into a hallway darker than the one above.

I hesitated. My palms began to sweat. I had never been on a lower deck before without permission, and seldom then. Of course I was trapped. I couldn't just stay there. Every closed cabin door seemed to hide something I didn't want to see. I decided to go back to my own bed. Then suddenly that acute, prickly feeling of being watched drove up my spine. I had passed a dark, open doorway a few yards back. I turned around and saw Ignacio leaning in it. Or I thought I had, because when I rubbed my eyes the figure disappeared.

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That decided it for me. I flew down the stairs and pulled up in the darkened corridor below. I turned away from the stairs so my eyes would become accustomed to the dark. As they did I saw another doorway yawning a deeper darkness than the rest of the hall. Ignacio stood in it, smiling at my attempt to be sneaky.

"Follow me if you want to see something," he said, and disappeared into the dark. I ran to the opening. Ignacio's footsteps echoed faintly. There was no time to think: I started down the spiral stairs, halting now and then to catch the metallic ring of his feet below.

After a time in darkness I lost track of my senses. Distance was meaningless. Time had no reference point. I stopped but heard no steps ahead. How long had I been here? And where was that? I pushed my hands firmly against the walls of the stairwell and took sluggish steps, expecting to suddenly walk off the edge of the known world.

In so doing I stepped on Ignacio's foot. I jumped back, but his hand took my shoulder in the dark. "You're going to get us caught, making all that noise. Hold on to me and don't step on my heels." He folded my fingers into the hem of his shirt and we walked farther into the darkness.

The steps fell away under our feet and the air grew colder and clammier. Finally the fresh sea smell gave way to an odor of packed, unwashed bodies that would have made my quarters at Oak Tree seem a paradise. A deep throbbing sound began and grew louder. I expected to find a low room filled with the languishing bodies of ragged boys, wrapped in a hazy darkness. I suppose the idea came from Ignacio's stories and reading too many Dickens novels.

So suddenly dragged into the bright glow of the engine room, I had to shield my eyes. Ignacio squatted immediately behind a steel pillar, pulling me with him. The sound of pistons drummed in my ears like a monstrous heartbeat.

"Let go!" Ignacio said. He pulled my hand from his shirt. Cupping his hands over my ear he said, "Guards across the room. Stay low. Head for that door."

"What door?" The shock of light and noise had been so great, I was only now coming to my senses.

"There."

We made our way along the wall without being seen. Once through the door the engine sound began to die away. But the smell of human excrement

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was almost too much. I wanted to turn back. Seeing this, Ignacio held me by one wrist.

"We're almost there."

I closed my eyes and let him lead me, feeling with my feet like I had on the stairs. I breathed through my mouth to lessen the stench. When he finally stopped I opened my eyes.

Straight out of Dickens. The room was low and dark. Human shapes lay on the floor and crouched against steel pillars. Someone coughed repeatedly. But it wasn't a book. I wish it had been.

"Why aren't there guards here?" I said.

"No need. Everyone is chained. But this is only the main room," Ignacio said. "We came to see the other part, too, remember?"

Hearing our voices, several boys looked at us. "Take me back up," I said. "I'm going to be sick."

"Go ahead and be sick. No one will notice. The Seven Beds is over there."

He pointed across the room.

"I won't go in there."

"Yes you will." He started to pull me ahead, but I tore at his hand and ran the other way. I ran without thinking, back toward the light of the engine room, then back to the comfort of my room.

"So tell me, Sarmington. What did you make of your little excursion last night?" Tutor did not seem upset, merely curious, as he settled back in the leather chair behind his desk.

I was too shocked to reply. I tried to check the sudden stampede of my breathing.

"Surely you didn't think you could traipse all over a ship of this size unobserved."

"No one stopped us, and Ignacio said..."

"No one stopped you? We are trying to teach you to be self-responsible adults. Like any society we have rules, Sarmington. You were taught to obey those rules. So do not say that no one stopped you. You were to have stopped yourself, my son."

Those two words — "my son" — turned my stomach over. Somehow they had a sickening finality to them.

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"You believe that punishment waits for you, don't you, Sarmington?"

I nodded.

"First let me tell you something pleasant. Ignacio will leave us soon. He has earned the right to go ashore, the one thing he has always wanted. I am proud of him. He has done well in his studies."

I must have looked totally amazed, because Tutor's voice speeded up suddenly. "Of course he made errors in the past. That is only to be expected. But he has overcome his limitations and will be rewarded accordingly."

His voice became an intimate whisper: "His early mistakes were much like your own, Sarmington."

"How will I be punished, sir?" I said nervously.

"Punishment?" he said in his normal voice. "There is no punishment here for you, Sarmington. You were brought here to fill a need, and now that Ignacio is leaving that need awaits. You are to take his place."

"I don't understand."

"Ignacio was my understudy, you might say, though he never wanted the job. It was his unless we found a more suitable candidate. You like the sea air, that is obvious. And you are ready to please, if at all possible. True, you strayed outside the rules, but you would have seen everything aboard eventually. Your willingness to follow Ignacio shows both loyalty and initiative. Those are qualities we highly prize."

My hands gripped the arms of my chair. Suddenly this giant ship seemed a constricting collar around my neck. I breathed loudly through my nose, but Tutor went on...

"Of course, it may be years before you take my place. I pray not too many. Ignacio does not know it, but one day — before I die — I hope to join him on our southern estate. He..."

Tutor's words continued hammering at me until I thought I would burst. I stared out the wide window at the barren ocean ahead of us: a gray wasteland of eternal unrest...

"Initially your functions may seem like punishment, Sarmington, but only if you resist them. You must learn every part of the ship, do every job. Tonight you sleep in your old berth, but tomorrow..."

I sprang from my chair and rushed to the door. It was locked of course, though I clawed at it like a wild animal. Tutor did nothing to stop me. When I finally faced him, he looked at me sadly and shook his head.

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"I had so hoped it wouldn't come to this, Sarmington. I thought you showed such promise. But perhaps it will be necessary to punish you after all." Tutor reached under his desk and I heard a bell chime faintly. In a moment I heard footsteps.

"You wanted to know your punishment." The best I could do was nod jerkily. "You've seen the boys who swab the decks?" I nodded again. "Good. I assume you know where they reside. If you make it out of there alive we will talk again."

I HAVE SLEPT in The Seven Beds — this prison, this death row — for forty nights. The smell no longer bothers me. I only know that — for tonight at least — I have hope: I can remember my name. That is how you tell if you're still alive.

In forty days I have seen the bodies of nine boys fed to the sharks. I have also seen one boy released, so it can happen! I believe that, no matter what, I will not be killed. I am needed here.

It is the task of we seven to feed the sharks. Garbage is collected from throughout the ship, great quantities of it, bagged and dumped during the night into the room through a hole in the ceiling. We are quite literally the garbagemen. We must either throw it off the stern each morning or drown in our own refuse. The first time a body came wrapped in burlap, I screamed until a guard appeared and struck me unconscious with a length of iron pipe. Now bodies are bothersome only because they are heavy to move, compared to the other garbage.

I am determined to live. I am determined to see the light of day and live again on the top deck. We get little food here, so we break into certain bags that look promising. Occasionally I recognize scraps that could only come from the Class I menu.

Besides the food I search for intelligible writing from the upper decks. I preserve what I find in a small plastic bag I keep tied around my neck.

Each morning we are led upstairs to the aft deck, and Tutor comes to watch us heave the sacks and corpses overboard. I know he has seen the positive change in me. He smiles whenever I make a particularly good toss and look toward him for approval. He nods. Though I may feel tired, just that much recognition from him, just that little sign of encouragement, makes me

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surge with energy. I know my body is getting stronger under this regime of hard labor. I know from Tutor's looks that I am improving my lot. It is only a matter of time and effort on my part before I return to the top deck. I know that.

Here is the last bag for today. I snatch it from the hands of another man, who gladly lets me take it. I look at Tutor. He is still smiling. I look out to sea and there, perhaps thirty feet away, is the biggest of the sharks.

I spin on my heel, spin and release like throwing the hammer. The fish is ready (he and I are friends). The bag is arcing. My shark is swirling, waiting. My placement is without fault. The white nose protrudes above the water, the mouth sweeps up smoothly, takes the bag and disappears with a swish of his tail.

I look back at Tutor. He is pleased. He waves! I am almost in tears at this demonstration of confidence in me. He leaves the rail and heads upstairs, where I wish to go, and a guard approaches me, places a mop in my hand.

The Class I boys will be here soon for morning exercise. We must not leave one piece of filth in sight. Not one single drop of blood.

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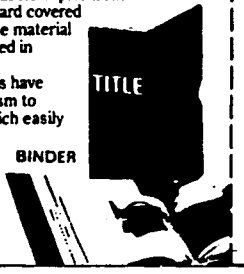

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Elizabeth Moon has published several novels, the most recent being Supporting Chance *from Baen Books. She grew up in South Texas, earned degrees from Rice University and the University of Texas, spent three years in the Marines, six years in rural EMS, and four years on the city council of the very small town where she lives with her husband and son.*

When we asked her to write about the story, she wrote a long, beautiful letter which we can't reproduce here, except in small part. She notes that she is nothing like the protagonist of "Aura," yet the main incident of the story is true. "Like all old childhood scars," she writes, "it reopened when my mother died in late 1990. We touched on it, in the long talks about the past while she was dying. I've always felt it was the central knot in the tangle of my attitudes, but she had not realized I even remembered it. 'My goodness,' she said, her eyes alert for a moment. Then, softly, 'We hoped you'd forget.'"

Aura

By Elizabeth Moon

ONCE A YEAR EVERYONE else hated numbers as much as she did. She faced the pile of bank statements, receipts, 1099s, and W-2s with the comforting certainty that everyone else — all hundred million or so heads of household (or their spouses) — felt exactly the same about the columns of numbers. Taxes again. Some people used computers, of course, and some had accountants. She had herself, four sharp pencils, and a pen to ink over the numbers if they ever balanced.

Brad would check them before she inked them. In an ordinary year, he would expect nothing of her but a steady supply of coffee and snacks, and the assembly of the documents, but this year he had orders — doctor's orders — not to bother himself with tax preparation. He was sure she could do the taxes if she tried. He had recovered pretty well from the stroke, but he found it very hard to read. The words, he said, jumped around on the page.

She knew all about that, but with her it was numbers. Letters had graceful shapes, decorative qualities. Words carried with them their meaning, smooth and

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rough, clear and opaque, each word on the page evoking a separate image in her mind. They never tangled themselves up, and best of all no one ever insisted on checking the sum. Numbers...she remembered her second-grade teacher slapping a ruler on the desk, and insisting that numbers were simpler than words, that any child who could read so well could surely *add*. "There's only one *right* answer," her teacher had said, and she had understood even then why words were better. You could imagine green as any shade of green you wanted...it didn't have to be *right*.

She remembered the trickle of sweat down her sides under her starched dress during flashcard drills, the horrible foreknowledge that she would blurt out the wrong answer and have to sit down, while another child "traveled" to the next desk. The children had laughed; the teacher had scolded her for carelessness; her mother had dragged her to the eye doctor for tests. Her eyes, he'd said, were normal. It was probably an emotional thing, a physical symptom of her dislike of numbers. Most girls, he'd said as he patted her head, didn't like arithmetic. Her mother and the teacher both interpreted this as laziness and deceitfulness, and she'd spent miserable hours with the flashcards until she passed into third grade.

Now she watched the numbers writhe, the blurred print of Brad's W-2 shimmering so that she could hardly pick out the middle two digits of his Social Security number. Why did they insist on using numbers for identification? She'd have gladly changed her name to something outlandish to ensure uniqueness. And if they had to use them, why couldn't she put her own number? But they demanded his, and there was something even more humiliating about being identified by *his* number instead of her own. She didn't like it; she never had, and she never would.

She printed Brad's number in the little space, grimly careful, and began filling in the other blanks. Perhaps if she concentrated — her teachers had emphasized the dangers of daydreaming, of letting her imagination loose where numbers were concerned — she could get through this. She would treat it as a recipe, a long, complicated old-world recipe, or perhaps directions for reupholstering a couch. First you do this, then that, and at the end it looks like something you could eat, or sit on.

The problem was that she had no picture in her mind of what the completed, perfect tax form should look like. Cookbooks had pictures of those fancy dishes. Sewing books or home decorating books had pictures,

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pictures of drapes, dresses, furniture. The directions would make sense, because she would know what the end was...if you add sleeves to bodice, and bodice to skirt, you have a dress. If you add filling to meat, and meat to pastry, you have a fancy entrée. Numbers had no pictures; she could not *see* anything in them, no final outcome of all these blanks filled in except a form with its blanks filled in...it meant nothing.

She found she'd miscopied the amount of interest income, and erased it carefully. That was wrong, of course. Carelessness. It did mean something; it meant if she made a mistake, they would come for her. They would take the money, and the house, and even put her in prison. The page before her shimmered, then went flat; for a moment she could not find the right blank to fill in. Prison was all numbers, like the military. Brad had been in the military; he still said, "By the numbers," sometimes, a kind of joke from those days. She had written him two letters, to addresses full of numbers and letters in a jumbled mix that made no sense. Why, she had asked, couldn't the army have normal addresses? He had laughed.

Doggedly, she poked the calculator's flat-topped buttons. Wrong; she forgot the decimal point. Another wrong; her finger had slipped from the 8 to the 5. She blinked at the bank's form. Was that a computerized 0, or an 8? Hard to read anytime, and now...her chest tightened. She took a deep breath, held it, let it out slowly. Eight, or zero? Zero. Eight. The diagonal wavered, became horizontal, wavered back to diagonal, a tiny compass needle leading her the wrong way. She felt pressure in her head; the numbers acquired a sinister aspect on the page, even beyond the threat of taxes, IRS, flash cards. She would have to quit for today; she would have to come back to this later, another time, after a night's rest.

She carried the wineglass carefully by the stem, so that she would not smudge the clean delicate curves with her fingers. It seemed a long way from the kitchen to the dining room. It was the first time she had been trusted to carry anything so breakable. She was setting a holiday table for Aunt Sarah, who wasn't really her aunt, but her mother's best friend in the neighborhood.

She leaned forward between the chairs, enjoying the sound of men's voices speaking a language she did not know, to place the wineglass at the tip of the knife, just as Aunt Sarah had instructed. Strangers had come, friends of Uncle Sam's and Aunt Sarah's, from a time before they'd moved to the brick

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house on the corner. The men ignored her, as they talked; she expected that, though she didn't like it. Unlike the local men, they wore long sleeves, even in the heat. She wondered about that as she wondered about most things. Had they come from someplace even hotter? One of them, sitting with his back in a blaze of sunlight, had finally unbuttoned his cuffs, and turned them back, so perhaps they felt the heat just as she did.

But the numbers. The numbers on the stranger's arm, funny dark numbers that showed through wiry dark hair. She had never seen that.

She never remembered asking, only that she had. Only that Aunt Sarah, for the first and only time, knuckled the back of her neck and dragged her into the next room, hissing fiercely in her ear: "Don't ever ask! Don't EVER ask!" And she remembered the man's face turning toward her, white as his shirt, as white as the cuff turned back so carefully...and buttoned down as quickly, emotions she could not understand quickly hidden as the numbers, buttoned snugly under a common face of gentleness and good holiday manners.

She had a headache that night, the kind with blinding flashes of light in her eyes that would not go away, the kind she could not explain to grownups. The next day the grownups explained to her—gently, because she was young (the first time she had been allowed to carry the wineglasses, so carefully, so quietly) about the numbers. They explained again later. They tried not to frighten her. You're lucky, they said. You will never know such things. It's all right. It's over. He's not angry with you.

But that one sidelong glance, and the feel of loving fingers fastened on the neck of her dress, suddenly harsh, suddenly strange: that could not be undone. She never saw the man again; she was not surprised. He had been angry, she knew, whatever they said; he had been hurt, and it was her fault for being lucky, for being rude, for all the things she had ever done wrong. The headache had been punishment.

The memory cycled endlessly. She remembered the texture of the cloth, the pattern of Aunt Sarah's knives and forks, the feel of the wineglass stem between her fingers, the struggle she had had to walk carefully, not skipping, from the kitchen, the dense sunlight streaming in the windows, the smell of the roast and vegetables, the way her foot had bumped the table leg. The dishes that day had pink roses around the rims, not linked blue squares; Aunt Sarah was funny about that, and never used both sets on the table at once.

She remembered the faint clean smell of Uncle Sam's shaving lotion, the

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men's strong hands gesturing as they talked in that language she had never heard, a language full of blocky, angular sounds. It sounded old, she thought, older than anything she spoke, older than Spanish, or the Latin the priests spoke in her friend Mary's church. She had liked the language, but she had not really liked the other men that much. They were ignoring her. Uncle Sam and Aunt Sarah never ignored her; they had no daughter and she fit neatly between their sons in age. She enjoyed a special position in this house; she often pretended she really was their niece, that she belonged to them. So even though she had been told to leave the men alone to talk, she wished they would all look at her, recognize her as part of the family, even approve of her, as Uncle Sam did.

It was in that context she had leaned forward, flicked a flirtatious glance at Uncle Sam, and asked what she had asked. About the numbers.

SHE WOKE sweating from *that* nightmare again. She never quite heard her own voice, never quite remembered which intolerable words she had used to ask that intolerable question. If she heard herself, she sometimes thought, she could not bear it. She pushed the covers aside, and sat up. Over forty, and still caught in that old disgrace — ! Ridiculous. Her friends told her that, and had told her that, and still once or twice a year she woke in a panic, like this, with the full weight of it still on her head. She knew, as they did not, that nothing could undo the pain she had given, and if an innocent child could thrust so sharp a sword into so wounded an adult, what hope for adults? What hope for her, who had made so many stupid mistakes, not only that one, and not only from opening her mouth to ask stupid questions...though that was, even now, a constant failing.

Brad was asleep; the cry she remembered giving must have been in the dream for he had not stirred. She pushed herself off the bed and blinked hard, trying to see in the darkness. Flickers of light, not quite enough to signal a migraine on its way, but a warning. She found her slippers by feel, and shuffled down the hall, running her hand along the wall. No sound from Lee's room, and none from Tina. They both slept heavily; she'd been lucky that way, too. Glimmers danced in her sight, linking into shapes she didn't want to see. Migraine aura, she reminded herself firmly. It's not really numbers, and certainly not *those* numbers; she had never been able to remember the

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numbers, not even when she could see the man's arm, the cigarette in his fingers, and the line at the wrist where the brown hand became the white arm. She could see the fine dark hairs, the white skin below, and the numbers...but not *which*.

She staggered into the kitchen doorframe, and clung to it. The glimmers twitched, pulsing with her heartbeat, edging into almost coherent patterns. No longer strings of numbers...now they made headlines, glowing in nasty lime-green, of the most stupid or cruel things she had ever said, and now dislimned into portraits of dead faces, green on black. Then they turned gold, brilliant glittering specks of gold that broke crisply into angled patterns, dazzling. Migraine aura. She knew it had to be that, and nothing more...even when the gold brightened intolerably, each speck spreading to a wide flake like one lens of an insect's compound eye.

It stared at her, remote and hostile, each lens reflecting her child's face, the two little bows she had worn holding the side-hair back, the lace collar. The child's mouth opened — her mouth — and out sped geometric solids of glittering gold, flashing light from each facet, from a numeral etched on each face. Hundreds of mouths, hundreds of solids, hundreds of numbers, sickeningly in motion as the vast insect turned its head. From around the eye jointed antennae sprouted, proliferated, elaborated, into great feather fans that waved toward her.

She turned the light on. She had never seen the room before, this tiled kitchen floor with its glittering reflection, the ominous bulk of some purring alien at her side. She grabbed for safety, and its side came away in her hand; cold air poured over her feet. *Re-fri-ger-a-tor* floated through her mind in a stuttering sequence, each sound edged with tattered frills of meaning. She leaned toward the light and cold, but it disappeared with a faint thud, exhaling a stale odor of roast and vegetables. All across her vision, the faceted mosaic of gold and black lay between her and the strange room. Then it wavered and vanished, leaving behind only an edge of brightness around each object, a vague shimmer.

She still did not know the room. Or, she told herself, she knew it intellectually, but as an abstraction. She knew the canned peas would be behind that door; she knew her dishes had a pattern of blue flowers on white. It did not interest her, and it held no memories of emotion. Her dishes could have been cream with pink roses, or yellow with a chain of blue squares. The

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table on which she had served so many meals might have been oblong instead of round. It might have had another cloth on it. The printed pattern of hers, a wreath of green vine leaves, seemed to mock her.

Take your medicine, one corner of her mind told her. *Take it now.* Medicine. The medicine was down the hall again, in the dark, in the bathroom cabinet. It was locked; she would have to turn on the light to find the key. Brad would waken, and be muzzily sympathetic. In less than a breath, the right side of her face went stiff; she could feel the hardening of that side of her brain, as if someone had poured concrete into her empty skull. Too late now...a spike of pain impaled her head. Nausea roiled her stomach. So stupid, she told herself. You should have taken the medicine when you woke up. She told herself that every time.

She could not have worked on taxes the next day even if the threat of another migraine had not pressed in on her, squeezing her mind to the lining of her skull. She had visitors.

"Do you come from a dysfunctional family?" asked the new rector's wife. They had come to introduce themselves, to learn "about your needs and how the church can help you," they had said. The rector's wife had the competent air of a good nurse who expects cooperation.

"No...not really." She had backed into her chair as far as she could; she flinched inwardly from the rector's wife's expression. They would already know, she supposed. They would already have made their judgments. "My — uh — parents were divorced, but aside from that — " *That* was not something most people could put aside, but she still felt that society's reaction to divorce, especially in school, had done her more harm than the divorce itself. Now it was fashionable to have come from a dysfunctional family; back then only perfection would do. She distrusted the change in attitude.

"Aahh." A knowing, professional sound, judgment made and rendered all in one. Efficient. "Are you all right, really?"

She was all right, really. She had learned to ignore the shimmering edges, the sudden disruption of vision into fragmented, faceted forms (easier, now, with computer graphics so common — she could tell herself firmly that her visual computer was malfunctioning), even the strangeness that made her own house, her own family, so disturbing. Migraine aura. That's all it was,

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and the association with a childhood event purely accidental. No alcoholism, no drug addiction, no physical or sexual or emotional abuse. *You've got nothing to complain about,* said the anonymous voice. *You're lucky.* Luck being, as it were, her only handicap.

"Really all right," she repeated, hoping it was only once. "Fine." The rector's wife had begun to glitter dangerously; perhaps she would leave before she turned into an abstraction of planes and angles of beaten gold. The rector's wife would be terrifying as an insect, vast and intrusive; she would have grasping claws and the impersonal determination of a mantis dissecting a grasshopper for lunch. She must have said something else, because the rector was talking now, replying, it seemed, to something she had said. Something about her father. She blinked, hoping to resolve the pattern of bright dots and dark ones into something recognizable. The rector had dark hairs on the backs of his hands, and fingernails neatly clipped.

"—ought to tell him how you feel," the rector said. "Or that's a kind of lying, too, isn't it? Concealing things? One should be honest..."

As a child, perhaps. A child craving attention. A child honestly curious. A child putting together those two childish things...instead of putting away childish things...and thereby releasing...whatever she had released. She knew better than to say that; she had said too much already. She walked them from the house; they smiled and waved. They had left their packet of wisdom for her. Honesty, forgiveness, love, wrapped in shining paper with shining ribbons around it. Her mind plucked at the glittering bows.

But it was not hers. It belonged to someone else. She glanced around, feeling unseen eyes. They had been blue, she remembered. Clear blue, and the whites very white, only a slight rim of red at the edge of the eyelid, probably from the smoke. Below his eyes a gray stain of sadness, the flesh sagging away from the bones. He had had one crooked front tooth, and some steel caps when he spoke that reflected points of light. *It's not me that won't forgive,* she said silently to the car that had long since driven away.

Around her, the gray blocks piled up, neatly, inexorably. The time she had said something about Emily's nose, the time she had snapped at Laura, the time she had lied about the check being in the mail. Days of plenty and peace, days of happiness, days when she had not thought of him at all, each one a gray stone walling her in. Stupid questions, cruel remarks, each a spike fixed in the stones, pointing inward. Clumsiness, inattention, laziness: the

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complaints of her teachers. Pride, insensitivity, selfishness: the complaints of her spiritual leaders. Hypersensitivity, priggishness: the complaints of her friends.

She looked at her arms, unsurprised to find them covered with blue numbers, zero to infinity, all she had done wrong and failed to do right. Her head shuddered and split into wedges, like a chopped tomato. Each wedge, impaled on a spike, had its own faceted eyes with which to see, and what remained of her voice rose from the soggy puddle of juice at the joining of the wedges. Sorry, it said, in a child's tremulous whisper. I'm sorry. *Being sorry is not enough,* said the voice she would never quite forget, in the language she had never heard before. She knew the meaning, though. She always did.

Her usual reluctance to confront numbers suggested the mail as an escape. A pile of bills, advertisements, and two magazines. She picked up the magazine and flipped it open.

She had scarcely looked at the picture when her vision blurred; with no warning aura, the migraine invaded, overfilling her skull, pressing cruel thumbs on her eyeballs. She squinted at the magazine anyway. A black and white photograph danced on the page like a clipping on the wind.

Blurred face, sad eyes, lines of age and pain. She could not read the obituary, not really...she had never known his name; she had never remembered his profession. This was not the same man, could not be. One word only resolved into letters, quivering. She had seen that name in school, under the pictures of dead men stacked like firewood, a few survivors' masklike faces. Those faces shifted, merged into faces from later pictures, later wars, flickered through her mind in an endless stream: men, women, children, babies, bodies, mouths gaping, eyes wide or closed in death, crowds behind barbed wire, single prisoners hunched in cells, eyes glistening in the camera's flash, staring at her, through the lens and flickering shutter, with that expression she had never forgotten, that disbelief, that horror, that disgust.

The migraine squeezed itself, contracting to a single point of pain in midbrain. She grunted, as if someone had slugged her belly. Nothing was enough, nothing would ever be enough. She thought, as always too late, what she could have said to the rector's smiling wife: "No, not a dysfunctional family. A dysfunctional *world.*"

With the suddenness of a pricked soap bubble, the migraine disappeared, leaving her unbalanced, almost giddy.

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She laid the magazine on her desk, atop the piles of bank statements, the half-finished tax return. She felt warm and moist, a loaf of bread new-baked, steaming slightly. While her head was clear, while she could think, she would try to finish the taxes. Such respites, rare proof of the reality of miracles, lasted at most a few hours.

The numbers lay quiet, their meaning leached of danger, no more remarkable than a collection of letters. She fed them into the calculator, copied them, added and subtracted as the directions specified. The result had a certainty she had never associated with numbers, a feeling of solidity so new that it surprised her into noticing.

Tentatively, she let her mind visualize a number: just a number, not a dark mark on white skin. A cascade of them, in the bright pastels of her childhood's books, tumbled over each other, eager as puppies. Little yellow fives, soft lavender fours, orange threes, blue twos, fat white marshmallow ones, no longer scintillating in dangerous light, but docile, friendly, even affectionate. She felt as if she had stumbled into a strange universe where all the familiar rules changed.

In one blinding flash more intrusive than even the migraine, she saw the book itself, its pages smudged and worn at the edges, its pictures simple and innocent and harmless. Her own hand, none too clean (her adult eye recognized grape jelly and peanut butter) spread starfish-wise, her own voice piping "I like one and I like two and...that makes three, Mommy!"

So she had not always hated numbers; she had not always been driven to blind panic by the operation of one upon another. Had that panic come from her question, which even now loomed worse than the pain of migraines? She shivered, hoping as always that she would not remember it. But the numbers themselves surrounded her, touched her hands, stroked her head; softly, gently, insistently, they urged her through that final door where the terrible question lay, coiled malice, proof of iniquity beyond forgiveness, steeped in a poison only she could brew. No aura splintered that sight into painless abstraction, no migraine split her consciousness away from it — the numbers, merciless once more, compelled her.

Cowering in the corner of her mind, that memory trembled, fragile as a wineglass, as a child's trust, as an adult's courage.

She had thought he had numbers on his arm because he liked numbers, just as she liked numbers. Why else would someone put numbers on his arm,

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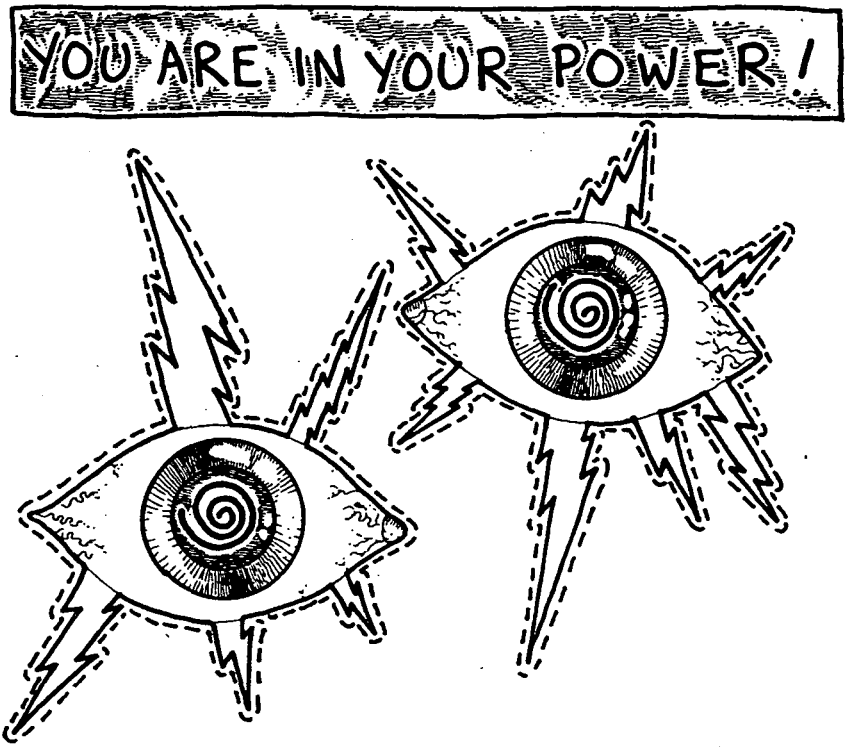
instead of the dragon or heart or snake tattoos she had seen on other men? She wanted numbers too, perhaps in pretty colors like the dragons. She waited for a pause in the conversation, because she knew that interrupting was rude, and she asked her question as politely as she knew how. "When will I get *my* numbers?"


YOU ARE IN YOUR POWER!
1.) CUT ALONG DOTTED LINES. 2.) GLUE HYPNO-EYES OVER REFLECTION OF YOUR EYES IN MIRROR. 3.) STARE INTO HYPNO-EYES 'TIL YOU ENTER DEEP TRANCE. 4.) YOU HAVE YOU WHERE YOU WANT YOU NOW; YOU'LL DO ANYTHING YOU SAY.
wong

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Mary A. Turzillo last appeared in F&SF *in our March 1993 issue. She has had stories in* The Ultimate Witch, SF Age, Interzone, *and* Pulphouse: A Hardback Magazine. *Her poetry has appeared in* Asimov's.

She writes, "'Miranda's Monster' was inspired by a mural in a classroom where I took freshman comp. The rest of the story has nothing to do with reality."

Miranda's Monster

By Mary A. Turzillo

FAIRCHILD HALL LOOKED like a castle, but Miranda Perletier thought the cool echoes and damp stone odor suggested a water-monster's cave. It was September 1968, Buckeye State University, and Miranda was hurrying to teach her very first class.

She twisted the key and screaked her office door open. On the cracked linoleum lay a big envelope. She slid her granny glasses up the bridge of her nose, sleeked her long hair back, and ripped it open. Inside was a drawing in black, black ink: a gravestone, lettered PROFESSOR PERLETIER, R.I.P. 1968.

Chilled, she turned the drawing over. On the back was: SORRY YOU GAVE ME THAT F? It was signed KANE.

An F? Never! Failing a student was too cruel. She had never even taught a class all her own before. The note must be for a former occupant. She grabbed her gradebook and dashed upstairs.

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She had wanted to be a professor since age twelve. Her impractical, intellectual father, who had swept floors at a teacher's college in Iowa, had given his children literary names: Miranda, Dulcinea, Caedmon. From him she got her love of stories, her dreams of inspiring students with the magic of literature.

A crowd waited on the landing. Girls in miniskirts with teased hair and black eye makeup, girls with long, wild hair and daisies painted on their cheeks. Guys bearded, with shaggy manes and bell-bottom jeans belted so low you could see tendrils of pubic hair. A few ROTC types, too, with button-down collars and naked, vulnerable skulls. Her freshmen. Her very first students. Their faces were so trusting. Their minds would be like sponges for her lessons of beauty. She wanted to hug them all.

"Door's locked," said a girl in elephant bell-bottoms.

A wiry old lady in tweed raced up the worn stairs: Dr. Fable. "Not locked. It's those blasted Lilliputians. They did this last year, too." She shook her iron-gray locks like a goddess from Blake's Prophetic Books. Students scrambled out of her way. To Miranda she said, "Get back in line, child."

Miranda wanted to pull her miniskirt down to make it longer. "But Dr. Fable, I'm their teacher."

"Oh." Fable took another look, as if she had missed the brand that said ROOKIE TEACHING ASSISTANT on Miranda's forehead. "Well, get out of the way while I open this damn fool door." Fable kicked the lower hinge and, with a powerful twist, wrenched the door open. "You can't turn your back on it; things get out." She curtsied ironically, and bounded back downstairs, leaving Miranda to wonder what things got out of what.

"My roommate said Fairchild Hall has ghosts," said a dainty girl with a big nose and fluffy blonde hair.

Room 203 smelled like paper and erasers. Ancient wooden desks sat in rows, covered with the patina of half a century of human hands, frat house symbols gouged in their surfaces. The room was neat, empty, waiting.

The mural was waiting, too.

The colors were deep, the lines sweeping, the effect garish. Some art student had done it, years ago. September morning light from the bank of windows made it glow like stained glass.

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Ebenezer Scrooge and Titania, Queen of Fairies, melodramatically shared a spotlight, inches from where the Wife of Bath flirted with a degenerate from *Confessions of an English Opium Eater.* Julius Caesar, Brutus's dagger protruding jauntily from his toga, slumped at the feet of King Arthur. Milton's Satan glared at Othello. Gulliver lay tethered by his own hair while Caliban and David Copperfield gaped at him.

But Miranda had eyes only for the monster. Grendel. The slathering *Beowulf* beast, lurid green with black saliva dripping from his teeth. Hunch-backed. Eyes red with fury. Claw-like arms (the artist perhaps influenced by the tyrannosaurus rex in *Fantasia*), menacing an Anglo-Saxon warrior. Miranda could tell the warrior was Anglo-Saxon because of the dragon on his shield.

Miranda quavered, "Students! This is section 101b, and I am Miss Perletier. Here is a syllabus—" Her hands trembled as she handed out dittoed sheets. Students sniffed the still-wet duplicating fluid. " — and a writing assignment for our first day."

Miranda dropped the assignment sheets. A boy with a peace-sign necklace and tie-dyed gauze shirt helped her pick them up.

"Uh, on second thought, it might be dull to write about THE VALUE OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION TO SOCIETY."

"Let's write about the wall painting," said a boy with a bushy beard and angelic blue eyes.

Miranda blinked. "Good idea! Everybody write about Grendel."

Silence. "Who's Grendel?" asked Bushy Beard.

Miranda adored explaining things. She told them the story of *Beowulf*, acting out the parts. The class period was half over when she realized that it was too late for them to write.

So she let them go early, then went over to introduce herself properly to Grendel.

"Hello, you 'blaed-fastne feond.'" Nobody was watching, so she closed her eyes and kissed Grendel.

And — Miranda had always been imaginative — felt her lips press a leathery cheek, smelling of sea-water.

At the threshold of hearing, fairies tittered. But when she opened her eyes, Titania, Grendel, and the whole mural looked as innocent and flat as when she had first seen them.

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Dr. Fable stopped Miranda on the way out of the building. "You've discovered our Grendel," she said. "Perhaps you'll discover yourself in the mural, too."

IN HER APARTMENT, after her freshmen wrote in class, Miranda was amazed that it took her an hour to grade just one essay.

"Be cool," said Vivianne, her roommate, "and disappear tomorrow. Luigi is crashing here on his way to Oberlin, and we'd dig some privacy."

"But I have papers to grade."

"Bummer. That's what they build libraries for."

Miranda went into the bedroom and brushed her hair, furiously. She didn't want to grade papers in the library.

Vivianne followed her, toying with her love-beads. "I'll do the dishes for a month. Dig it. A whole month."

Miranda pulled yard-long loose hairs out of the brush. "You must really like Luigi."

Vivianne blew a kiss toward the ceiling. "The man is right on. What can I say?"

Miranda sighed. "Okay, I'll grade in my office."

Saturday morning, in Indian-summer heat, Miranda climbed the stone steps to the doors of Fairchild Hall. The lock was stiff; the door creaked open like the portal to the mead hall where Beowulf greeted Hrothgar.

She was tempted to go look at the Grendel mural again. But if it took her an hour to do just one paper, a class of thirty was going to take the whole weekend.

So she skipped down the creaky stairs to her office and settled at the old oak desk, glad that her two office mates were elsewhere.

"The Angel-Sexton period of literature is very interesting," began the first paper. Miranda fought an impulse to write BORING, BORING in the margin. Her red pen took on a life of its own, bleeding corrections and advice: TRY FOR MORE VIVID LANGUAGE or I CAN'T FOLLOW YOUR LOGIC.

This was the first set of freshmen papers Miranda had ever graded, so she did not really find them boring. When she looked up, it was almost lunch time. She swung around in the oak office chair.

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A man stood in the office doorway, watching.

How long had he been there? He wore a polyester suit too small for his big frame and a frayed green tie. His eyes were angry, his face unhealthily pale and sweaty.

She swallowed. "Are you looking for someone?"

"Professor Perletier."

"I am Professor Perletier." The title sounded odd, but she tried to look professorial.

"Did you get my note?"

Miranda felt annoyed. "What note?"

The man bent down and fished something out of her wastebasket. "This." He thrust it at her. The sketch of a gravestone.

"Who are you, and why are you snooping through my wastebasket?"

He lowered his head as if his words had some deep meaning. "Kane's the name."

Miranda's stomach flipflopped. Should she call for help? He seemed harmless. He had made a mistake, that was all.

"Mr. Kane, I saw that note, yes, but I just started teaching this semester. I don't know how you even know my name, except that it's on my door. I certainly didn't give you an F."

Kane laughed. "I have the paper here. A fine paper, publishable. Best undergraduate paper you'll ever see. And you failed it. Because it reminded you of your own mediocrity."

"What are you talking about? I never taught you." Miranda stood and put the chair between Kane and her.

"You're stupid." Kane's voice was low, menacing.

"Let me see the paper." Miranda's heart hammered in her chest.

Kane handed her a tattered paper titled "GRENDEL AND HIS MOTHER: FREUDIAN IMPLICATIONS AND UNSPEAKABLE EVIL." Odd that the topic was like one she had assigned, but she certainly had not graded this paper. She skimmed: in flowery, hysterical language, it accused Grendel of every crime from incest to heroin peddling. A humor piece? No hint of playfulness. The grader's comments, on the last page, suggested that Kane get psychiatric help. Then, a big, red F.

"Look," began Miranda, "here are some papers I've graded. You can see this isn't my penmanship."

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Kane took a menacing step into the office. Miranda backed away.

"It's your work, bitch, and you're going to pay for it." Kane pulled from his pocket a pair of purple nylon tights. He held a length of one leg taut between his fists.

Miranda edged away. Could she rush by him into the hallway?

A gruff voice bellowed, "Kane, we've warned you about haunting this building. Maybe the police can explain to you about trespassing."

Kane spun around. It was Dr. Fable. Fable grabbed Kane's wrist. "You need another stay at Mercy Pavilion?"

Kane tried to pull away, but Dr. Fable twisted his arm behind him. "Give me this toy." She snatched the purple tights. "God, to what base uses we may come." She turned to Miranda. "You're the new graduate student I met Wednesday."

Miranda nodded, silent.

"This fellow fancies some woman professor responsible for his state. LSD put worms in his brain that all Freud's minions can't eradicate. But he's afraid of me. Aren't you, humbug?"

Kane looked ashamed to be cowed by someone smaller than he.

"He must have stolen a building key. Upstairs, Wormbrain."

Two young policemen met them at the top of the stair. Like most of her generation, Miranda had mixed feelings about police. But since she had never been arrested, never been in a sit-in, never been gassed, these policemen did not seem like pigs. They seemed like nice men who would remove Kane.

Miranda went back to her office, though her mind was not on her grading. Dr. Fable came back to check on her twice. Both times she nearly shrieked with fright.

"You've nothing to fear from the likes of Kane," said Fable. "You have hidden resources." She tapped her own temple and winked.

The incident faded from memory. Grendel, her beautiful monster, did not. She had her class study *Beowulf*.

Beowulf was not in the textbook. But Miranda typed a translation on spirit masters and got the secretary to run off copies. The typing was a labor of love. "Ooo, they'll love the part about wrenching off his arm," she thought, and, "What a lovely speech when the kingless thane steals the dragon's cup!"

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To her annoyance, her students vilified Grendel. She felt Grendel had tragic potential: the only character in the epic who had no leader, in a world where masterless men were outcasts. Grendel was a son of darkness, yes. But when revenge was heaped upon revenge, murder on murder, darkness and light were arbitrary.

She was wrong about the epic, her advisor told her. Imposing modern ethical concepts. Anachronism.

Dr. Fable thought otherwise. "You're using your gifts," she said. And the monster in the painting seemed to smile toothily.

One Saturday morning, Miranda arranged to meet David, the young man with granny glasses, concerning his paper.

She had known immediately that the paper was copied. Her heart sank as she read critical terms far too advanced for any freshman. "David, David," she keened to herself. "Is this my fault? I've been too demanding, and you've felt you had to cheat!" The source was easy to find. David knew enough to copy from the best: "The Monsters and the Critics," by J.R.R. Tolkien.

Finally, Miranda decided David wasn't going to show. "Coward," she muttered as she tugged her jacket on.

Miranda's concern went only skin deep, because she had a date for lunch at the Art Museum.

His name was Dharma Stefaniski, though baptized Kenneth. She was charmed by his handsome red beard and chestnut hair, as well as the tattoo of a rainbow on his left arm. He had a shy lopsided smile, and an enormous record collection: Jefferson Airplane, Ravi Shankar, Iron Butterfly.

She skipped up the old stairs from the basement of Fairchild Hall, anticipating buttered artichokes among the sculptures and the fountains, then a stroll hand-in-hand from Rodin's massive "The Thinker" to the voluptuous "Cupid and Psyche." They would giggle over Cupid's satiated smile, then spend the evening listening to Dharma's records.

Blocking the door, daylight and cold air streaming into Fairchild Hall from behind him, stood a dark figure.

Kane.

"They gave me drugs." Kane let the door creak closed. "But I didn't forget."

Miranda edged back, planning exit routes. "Forget what?"

"The F on that paper."

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"Oh, come on!" Miranda exploded. "You know very well I didn't give you an F on that paper. You got it years ago from some teacher that went on to teach somewhere else."

"No. You gave it to me." Kane ran his finger over the edge of a strange sword she suddenly noticed he had brought.

No, not a sword. The blade, heavy and sharp as a guillotine blade, from the paper-cutter in the English office.

Miranda was scared, but also furious. Dr. Fable said Kane was harmless. The mental hospital had released him. But here he was, with a heavy, sharp weapon. Not only was he threatening her life, he was making her late to meet Dharma!

"I showed you, that isn't even my handwriting!"

Kane looked uncertain.

"Try to remember the professor's face. Was she young, like me? Did she have long hair, like me?"

He swung the cutter blade, then let it dangle heavily. "I know her name was Perletier."

"What was her first name?"

Kane's brow knit and he peered at her darkly. "Shirley?"

"My name is Miranda! You changed her last name to match mine. But you didn't know her first name. Don't you see? It was the LSD!"

Kane's mouth puckered. He hunched his shoulders and cradled the cutter blade.

Miranda softened her voice. "Bad acid, Kane. That's all. Let me see the paper."

Kane propped the cutter blade against the door frame and produced the crumpled paper.

"This isn't a bad paper at all." Humor him. "Just needs more focus."

"I flunked out of Buckeye because of that paper." Kane wiped his nose on the sleeve of his jacket.

"Why, I'd give this paper a C plus. Or maybe a B, even."

New hostility flamed in his eyes.

"A B?" he growled. "This is publishable. This is Nobel Laureate work. When you fools are dead and buried, I'll be Professor Emeritus. My genius will blazon forth." He lowered his voice, half menace, half confiding. "I spoke to the President. He didn't answer my letters, so I called him and he said

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come right over. I flew. He admitted right away that he'd been following the plot."

"The president of the university?" Miranda choked.

Kane's eyes grew round. "No. The President of the United States."

"Oh," Miranda whispered. "Uh, why don't you wait here? I think I remember this Shirley person. I'll call her and — "

Kane grabbed her arm with a paralyzing grip. "I won't hurt you. Just excise the source of the problem." He groped for the cutter blade. "You're right-handed, aren't you?"

Miranda forced herself to relax in his grip, push toward him, then jerk away. He was blocking the main doors, so she ran to the stairs. Dr. Fable's office was on the third floor. Fable came in on Saturdays!

Miranda scurried up the stairs like a frightened squirrel. Kane lumbered heavily after her.

Dr. Fable's office was dark, empty.

She pushed through the double doors to the department library, an echoing, gabled room like a medieval chapel. Stairs led upward to a high window. She dashed up them.

Through the wire-meshed glass in the doors, she could see a fire escape. But how did the doors unlock?

Kane bellowed from the second story landing, "Perletier! Perletier!"

Miranda leapt back down the stairs, glad she'd worn sneakers. She burst through the double doors again, thinking when he got to the third floor she would push him off balance down the stairs.

He wasn't there. He was waiting on the second floor landing, chest heaving. "Goddam hippie!" he snarled.

"Hippie!" Miranda was outraged. She was not a hippie. Hippies did not have jobs. Hippies took drugs every day. Hippies did not wear miniskirts and teach freshman comp. "Hippie! I'm not the one who fried my brains with bad acid!"

Kane lurched up the stairs toward her.

There were two offices besides Fable's. One belonged to Dr. Langland, the medievalist, and the other —

She pounded on Langland's office, but knew before she tried that the ancient prof was not in. No light shone under the door, and Langland was so nearly blind he used the light even at noon.

Miranda pounded on the other door with the flats of her hands.

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Then she noticed there was no nameplate on the door.

Empty!

She wrenched the knob. Yes! And unlocked. She darted inside and tripped the lock just as Kane got to the third floor.

A telephone? No, the office was empty except for dusty cardboard boxes of old student themes.

"Pedantic bitch!" howled Kane.

Miranda leaned against the door, jarred by Kane's blows on it. Would it hold?

"An F! A goddam F!" She heard him stumble downstairs again.

Would he give up so easily?

Or was he trying to trick her into coming out?

The window!

Painted shut.

Could she break the window? Then she noticed the fire escape. Oh, no! Kane was planning to climb out a second story window, crawl up the fire escape, and break into the office she was in.

She started to cry. Her bloodied body would be found Monday or Tuesday — or even later, because who would look in this deserted room?

And not only that, she was late for her date. Dharma would think she was standing him up!

She laughed, through tears. Kane was going to chop her hand off, and she was worried about missing lunch!

Maybe Kane wouldn't think of the fire escape. But where could he have gone? She peeked down the fire escape. Nothing.

Kane's footsteps up the stairs again. Damn it!

Blows against the door again, more determined now.

The cutter blade! He had gone down to get the blade!

Miranda flew to the window, hammered on it with naked fists, kicked it. She took off her sneaker and pounded it. The frame clattered. The glass wouldn't break!

She looked around, panic knocking at her rib cage. Nothing! No phone, no tools, no weapons, only —

Box.

She grunted with the weight of the cardboard box. Then one, two, HEAVED it through the window. The glass shattered, explosively.

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She leaned out, ignoring glass shards. "I'm being murdered!" Two girls below looked up, consulted, then strolled away.

Miranda hoped they flunked out.

But now she could get to the fire escape.

She pulled out the biggest glass fragments and straddled the window frame.

But the fire escape didn't reach to this window, only as far as Dr. Langland's. And her legs were too short to reach.

At least Kane wouldn't be able to get up that way.

It didn't matter. He had chopped a hole in the door, and now inserted his hand and fumbled for the lock.

Miranda beat at his hand with her sneaker.

He wrenched the sneaker from her.

She backed against the window. She would have to jump. A broken leg was better than being hacked to death.

"HELP ME!" she yelled.

She threw all the power of her being into that yell.

A briny smell wafted to her, and Miranda flashed on a memory: she was on a rocky shore, imagining huge creatures that lived in the deep water. The power of that watery memory spurted into her like a geyser. She must not, would not let Kane kill her.

And then she heard it: someone lumbering up the stairs. Someone bigger than Dr. Fable or Dr. Langland. Bigger even than Kane.

Kane had the lock undone. But the door did not swing open. Instead, he yelled. "No!"

Miranda's whole being echoed, "NO!"

Scuffling. Intake of powerful breath. Choking, gurgling. The dank smell; rank and animal.

Crunching, like a wooden chair being twisted apart. And a sodden thud, like a melon thrown against the wall.

Miranda trembled, the force of her fear ebbing from her.

Nothing.

"Who's there?" she whispered. The briny smell faded.

Heavy, ursine footsteps downstairs again. Floor boards on the landing creaked. Shuffling, massive weight lumbered down the hall.

Again, nothing.

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Miranda felt limp. What was outside that door? The police? Dr. Fable? Wouldn't they have spoken to her?

She crept up to the door, pressed her face to the hole Kane had hacked with his cutter blade.

The cutter blade lay on the floor. A dark rivulet ran toward it, pooled in the hollow worn by the feet of generations of students.

Blood? Whose blood?

Nerves singing with fatigue and relief, Miranda unlatched the lock and peeked out.

Kane lay silent, gazing upward. Above him, gray paneling was smeared with red, as if someone had thrown a painted basketball at the wall. Kane's neck bent strangely, as if he were trying to tuck it under his arm.

"Kane," she spoke softly.

No answer. She watched his chest. It did not move.

"Poor Kane." She retrieved her sneaker.

He lay still as she tiptoed past him down the stairs.

THE POLICE insisted that she must have used martial arts training, or that Kane must have broken his own skull, spine, and neck in the struggle.

Dharma picked her up from the police station in his VW Bug. "Oh, wow," he said, his face alive with a mixture of concern and relief. "You're all spattered with blood!"

The next Monday, while her students wrote, she graded papers. Her head ached as if from great exertion, and her eyes sought the comfort of the mural.

A tap on the door.

Dr. Fable, smiling mischievously, beckoned. "So what happened?"

Miranda told the whole story. "This sounds foolish," she said, "but I think Grendel saved me."

Fable tsked. "You saved yourself. But if you ever notice a girl that seems to have a certain imaginative glow — like you — pass on this secret. The mural is a talisman from which you can summon what you want. You had the energy, and a strong soul."

Miranda smiled foolishly. "Me? My soul isn't very strong."

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"The proof's in what happened. Grendel's only a story. But he lives inside you."

"A monster inside me?"

Fable snorted. "A dozen monsters, and a dozen heroines. The mural brings out the gift." Fable glanced inside the classroom, at students who were putting papers on the desk. "If you doubt me, try another character."

Miranda giggled, and for a moment felt her power.

Fable whispered, "I suggest Titania."

"I think the thing that surprised me the most about heaven was how many lawyers there were."

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

LIFE AT GALACTIC CENTER

We're not in a lucky part of the galaxy, at least for views.

Our sun is tucked down in the disk's plane, though this took centuries to realize. In retrospect, perhaps it is puzzling that astronomers did not guess until the nineteenth century that the Milky Way is a disk, seen edge on.

Ancients used water analogies to describe it, images of rivers and streams. How much easier matters might have been if we could have seen the truly gaudy attraction in all the galaxy, the brilliant center.

Perhaps, though, our ignorance is good luck. Dark dust clouds block our view in the constellation Sagittarius, so we cannot see in the optical frequencies beyond the edge of our local spiral arm. Beyond that are immense dark lanes, blotting out the next arm and the hub beyond.

One way to see the center would be to live much nearer. But that could be fatal.

The galactic center is about 25,000 light years away. We orbit about two thirds of the way out into the spiral disk, a benign, even boring neighborhood. The nearest star, Alpha Centauri, is 4.2 light years away, an average stellar separation for our region, where there is a star in roughly every fifty cubic light years.

Were we to approach the galactic hub, well past the dust clouds, we would find a halo of stars glowing brightly, growing ever denser. In 1932 Carl Jansky discovered that, to his shock, the galactic center was the brightest radio location in the sky, outshining even our sun. Something was going on.

In the core, within a few light years of the exact center, there are a *million* stars within a single light year. On average, the nearer stars are

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only a hundredth of a light year away. This is only ten thousand times the distance from the Earth to the sun. Imagine having several stars so close they outshine the moon.

As one might expect, this is bad news for solar systems around such stars. Close collisions between all these stars occur in about a hundred thousand years, scrambling up planetary orbits, raining down comets upon them as well.

The galactic center is the conspicuous Times Square of the galaxy — and far more deadly than the comfortable suburbs like ours. Joel Davis's *Journey to the Center of Our Galaxy* details how horrific it is, points out that the survival time for an unshielded human within even a hundred light years of the core is probably hours.

I began studying the galactic center in the mid-1970s, out of curiosity. I did not guess that this mysterious region would intertwine two of my passions, physics and science fiction, though in part I was interested because I had begun writing a series of novels which seemed pointed in that direction.

The first was *In the Ocean of Night*, exploring the discovery that computer-based life seemed dominant throughout the galaxy. The action followed a British astronaut, Nigel Walmsley, cranky and opinionated. It detailed a few incidents in our solar system, in the late twentieth century and beyond, which uncovered the implication that "evolved adding machines," as Walmsley put it, had inherited the ruins of earlier, naturally derived alien societies.

As I began work on the next volume, I realized that the galactic center was the obvious place for machines to seek. By the early 1980s we knew that there is a virulent gamma ray flux there, hot clouds, and enormously energetic processes. Most of this we gathered from the radio emissions, which penetrate dust clouds and revealed the crackling activity at the center for the first time. Infrared astronomy soon caught up, unmasking the hot, tangled regions.

By the time I finished *Across the Sea of Suns*, I realized that I could do some research myself on the galactic center. I had by that time written papers on pulsars and galactic jets, and had both expertise and curiosity. Our galaxy is a barred spiral, meaning that a straight segment runs through the center, connecting two bright spiral arms. The inner thousand light years is a turbulent zone of high velocity clouds, moving so fast that gravitation finds it difficult to force them to collapse into stars.

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Magnetic fields are also strong, making collapse still harder. Few new stars, so few later supernova explosions.

In the 1960s my friend Larry Niven had begun his Known Space stories, featuring a colossal explosion at galactic center, perhaps a chain reaction of supernovas. There was some evidence of greatly energetic processes there, but we know now that there was no such mammoth explosion, big enough to make alien races flee. However, within the inner hundred light years, there does seem to have been a great energy release a few million years ago. In the infrared we can see the outrushing gases.

More striking, though, are mysterious features appearing in the radio. In 1984 I was giving a talk on galactic jets at UC Los Angeles, and my host was Mark Morris, a radio astronomer. "Explain this," he challenged, slapping down a radio map he had just made at the Very Large Array in New Mexico.

"Good grief," was my first reaction. "Is this a joke?"

It showed a feature I called the Claw, but which Mark more learnedly termed the Arch: a bright, curved prominence made up of slender fibers. Though the Arch is over a hundred light years long, these fibers are about a light year wide.

They curve upward from the galactic plane, like arcs of great circles which center near the galactic core, which is several hundred light years away. These intricate filaments shine by energetic (in fact, relativistic) electrons, radiating in strong magnetic fields, which are aligned along the filaments.

There was nothing remotely like them in astronomy. What process could make long, slightly curved paths, a light year wide?

I undertook the challenge, with some hesitation. The object was bizarre, which meant some new ideas were needed. I was aided by later discoveries in 1985, which spotted separate filaments within a few hundred light years of the core, single threads shining brightly. Above the Arch, some Japanese astronomers found what looks like a weak, fat jet.

How to explain thin filaments which glow by electron luminosity, a hundred times longer than they were wide? I thought of neon lights, which are glow discharges sustained by electric currents in slender tubes. What could contain the hot gas, or electrons? The magnetic fields, which mid-1980s measurements found to be at least a hundred times stronger than typical in the rest of the galaxy.

Astronomers began thinking of conceptual models for the phenom-

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enon, mostly using magnetic loops which had been somehow expelled from the galactic center, and were striking distant gas clouds. These I didn't much believe; the Arch was too orderly. Others thought maybe the filaments were cosmic strings — immense fractures in space-time, made in the early universe — lit up by their passage through the galactic inner regions. This model was disproved quickly, because strings should move at very nearly the speed of light; the Arch didn't.

By the time I got through with my calculations, building a mathematical model, I had decided that the entire network of Arch and threads might be a huge circuit. It had to be powered by some battery, and while most people thought the galactic center was the logical site, I kept noticing that it was hundreds of light years away. Instead, I studied the giant molecular clouds which were moving counter to the general galactic rotation. These were quite odd, dark and carrying millions of stellar masses of dust and gas in clumps light years wide.

I found that if they were even slightly ionized — and how could they not be, with so much ultraviolet glare from nearby blue stars? — these clouds would generate electric fields as they crossed the strong magnetic fields. The edges of these clouds could then act as batteries, applying voltages which accelerated electrons, sending them shooting along the magnetic field lines, lighting up the magnetic structures that already existed.

Since these discharges occurred because of momentary passage of clouds, they were essentially like weather — changeable. Perhaps we could see some bright filaments weaken, others flare? I calculated the times required, and found that the best we could expect was a change within a decade or so, or longer.

Since these were circuits, they reminded me of lightning. Clouds on Earth discharge to ground along slightly ionized trails in the air. The stroke time is about a second, just a bit shorter than the time the lightning takes to begin snaking about itself, like a garden hose — or the twisting, snapping sparks from generators, a cliche overworked in films like *Frankenstein*.

Could these fibers be a sort of slow-motion lightning, taking perhaps hundreds of thousands of years to discharge? Then we might see filaments curling about themselves, or each other?

I asked these questions, sketched out solutions, and made a few predictions. In science any model, to win

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favor, must paint an appealing picture and predict the outcome of future observations. I published the model in the *Astrophysical Journal* in 1988, "An Electrodynamic Model of the Galactic Center."

People seemed to find it plausible, if a bit strange. Electrodynamics isn't used much in astronomy, where gravity rules. I waited to see what observations would unmask.

Mark Morris kept making maps of the Arch region, but so far has seen no brightening or dimming. In 1990, though, some other radio astronomers found an odd thread they termed the Snake — because it twisted, not once but twice.

I was pleased. The Snake seems attached to a giant molecular cloud at one end, and merges with the spherical rim of a supernova at the other. Is its cause the cloud, or the supernova? We don't know.

For now, mine seems the only theory left standing in the blizzard of data we're now getting about the galactic center. But my model depends on, without explaining, the strong, smooth magnetic fields. How did they get there? Are they simply accumulated, as matter infalls? Or did some past explosion make them? We don't know.

And what about the jet? This points to the big unanswered question about the center: is there a black hole there? Certainly our experience with distant, active galactic nuclei leads us to suspect one, since the galactic jets I had already studied almost certainly come from the accretion disks around truly massive black holes, some ranging up to perhaps a billion stellar masses.

Measures of the orbital velocities of stars very close to the true galactic center, called Sagittarius A, suggest that a point mass of about a million stellar masses lurks there, giving off very little light.

Much controversy surrounds these observations, though, with some holding that the data could mean only a thousand stellar masses is needed. All that is packed into a radio bright structure less than ten times as wide as the distance between the Earth and our sun. The region is hard to fathom, though, because the total luminosity within fifteen light years of this structure is about ten million stellar luminosities. Picture ten million or more bright, young stars orbiting a tiny dark spot, and you'll see the problem making out what's going on.

While I was mulling over data and jotting equations, I kept on writing novels. What came to be called the Galactic Series (by my publisher) pushed on with *Great Sky River*, a

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reference to the ancient Indian names for the Milky Way. I focused on the inner ten light years, for dramatic effects, even though I knew the sheer energy flux there made humans quite vulnerable. It seemed a good stage to act out my main theme, the superiority of machines in much of the galaxy.

The huge energetics of the center would draw machines, I felt. The black hole would intrigue any inquisitive life form. And the struggle between vastly different forms would surge across such a virulent territory. Humans would be part of it all, but certainly not the major players.

So I began envisioning what it might be like at stage center. Black holes draw matter in. Energetic arguments suggest that a black hole at the center should ingest about a thousandth of a star's mass in a year, already ground into dust from the giant molecular clouds — with occasional burps if a whole sun gets swallowed. Indeed, the electrodynamic view I advanced suggested a mechanism to fuel the black hole: the discharges we see are in fact energy shed by slowing the clouds, a sort of electrodynamic brake.

The mass funnels into a disk, rotating about the hole. The disk gets hot from friction, its rotation perhaps shaping the jets which may focus intermittently above and below the disk. Here the diet of particles and photons is rich and varied. Only hard, tough machines could survive for long there. In the fourth novel, *Tides of Light*, I drew out these contrasts.

Machines which can reproduce themselves would, inevitably, fall under the laws of natural selection. Earlier forms which arrived from elsewhere would specialize to use local resources. The entire panoply of biology would recapitulate: parasites, predators, prey. Adaptation would shape machines, who would by their intelligence counter with their own clever moves, carrying out their long term agenda.

How to think of this? I prepare for novels by writing descriptive passages of places and characters. In spare moments I began working up snapshots of possible life forms and their survival styles. I wrote them in present tense, for a sense of immediacy, seeking the analogy to biology:

Above the disk nothing made of metal or ceramic can long survive.

The grinding down of stars goes on perpetually. Blobs of already incandescent matter spiral in at speeds higher than found anywhere else in the galaxy. The Eater holds eternally

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captive the gathered masses of a million dead suns. Its pull whirls the doomed matter in a final frenzied gyre.

The blobs rub against each other. Magnetic fields mediate the friction and in turn grow. The fields twine and loop through the condemned kernels. In tight collisions fields themselves annihilate against each other and more energy releases.

Above such brutal furnaces skim the phase creatures. They had once been of the mechanicals. Now they exist not in hard circuits or ceramic lattice-intelligences. They have evolved out of self-directed necessity. To drink more energy they have learned to dissolve.

As torrents of hard radiation lance through them, they are plasmas. This gathers in fluxes and stores them in long-range correlations.

When the flood ebbs the phase creatures change. In the cooler spots above the disk they can condense. Lacy filaments become gaseous discharges. The power so generated they broadcast outward, to lesser ranks who can store it.

The phase creatures themselves use these fluxes to organize themselves into free-floating networks. Circuits without wires. Electrons flowing only in their own self-consistently generated magnetic fields. Voltages and switches light-quick, gossamer thin.

Lively intelligences dance there. They enter the discussion which has been teeming above them, in the cooler realms. With silky elegance their thoughts merge with the hard beings who are the cruder, earlier forms of mechanicals.

But the phase creatures still know their origins. They share the thought patterns of the metallic forms. They converse.

My reading in evolutionary theory suggested that generally, the rate of development was faster where the contrast between energy levels was greatest. This explains why volcanic vents at the bottom of oceans proved a rich life site. Similarly, the tropics boast of myriad species, the poles few. The contrast between the black hole region and the surrounding sea of stars is similarly stark.

I worked out a crude model for setting up a current system which could link the disk of a black hole to the surroundings. The disk traps magnetic fields as infalling matter brings the field lines in. A rotating magnetic field can sling particles — probably electrons and positrons — out along the gradually opening field lines. The disk acts like an enormous rotating flywheel, driving currents

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and mass flow both up and down from the disk. This should yield two jets. One can calculate the energy yield—actually, just an upper bound, which turns out to be considerable.

This part of any electrodynamic model is quite iffy, because we know nothing directly from the black hole environment. A gamma ray emission was seen several times through the 1980s from somewhere near galactic center, which corresponds to the annihilation of electrons and positrons. Perhaps it was from the black hole region, but certainly it's intermittent, for it vanished years ago and has not been seen since. Perhaps the weather there changed.

Worse, the calculated energy going into jets proved to be much higher than the rather weak, broad jet seen (in radio maps) emerging northward from the center. So perhaps the process is much weaker than we think. Further, there is no visible counter-jet, casting doubt on the whole assumed geometry of the black hole region.

It is easy to show that the present core region is accreting matter at a mild rate. If a star plunged in, there would be much more emission. Still, all this assumes that the radiation from matter plunging into the disk and then into the hole is simply streaming out.

What if something else intercepts this flow, uses it, and degrades it into lukewarm heat? Then all our calculations of spectra would be awry. What could such intervening agencies be...?

Black holes have weather, of a sort.

Light streams from them. Blackness dwells at their cores, but friction heats the infalling gas and dust. These streams brim with forced radiation. Storms worry them. White-hot tornadoes whirl and suck.

For the immense hole at the exact center of the galaxy, a virulent glow hammers outward. It pushes incessantly at the crowded masses that circle it, jostling in their doomed orbits. Gravity's gullet forces the streams into a disk, churning ever inward. Suffering in the weather.

The press of hot photons is a wind, driving all before it. Except for the grazers. To these photovores, the great grinding disk is a source of food.

Fire-flowers blossom in the disk, sending up lashes of fierce ultraviolet. Storms of light.

Both above and below the accretion disk, in hovering clouds, these photons smash molecules to atoms, strip atoms into bare charge, whip particles into sleet. The clouds are debris, dust, grains. They are already

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doomed by gravity's rub, like nearly everything here.

Nearly. To the gossamer, floating herds this is a fountain. Their life source.

Sheets of them hang, billowing with the electromagnetic winds. Basking in the sting. Holding steady.

The photovores are patiently grazing. Some are Infras, others Ultras — tuned to soak up particular slices of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Each species has a characteristic polish and shape. Each works within evolutionary necessity, deploying great flat receptor planes. Each has a song, used to maintain orbit and angle.

Against the wrathful weather here, information is at least a partial defense. Position-keeping telemetry flits between the herd sheets. They sing luminously to each other in the eternal brimming day.

Hovering on the pressure of light, great wings of high-gloss moly-sheet spread. Vectoring, skating on winds, magnetic torques in a complex dynamical sum. Ruling forces govern their perpetual, gliding dance. This is decreed by intelligences they scarcely sense, machines that prowl the darker lanes further out.

Those magisterial forms need the energies from this furnace, yet do not venture here. The wise and valuable run no risks.

At times the herds fail. Vast shimmering sheets peel away. Many are cast into the shrouded masses of molecular clouds, which are themselves soon to boil away. Others follow a helpless descending gyre. Long before they could strike the brilliant disk, the hard glare dissolves their lattices. They burst open and flare with fatal energies.

Now a greater threat spirals lazily down. It descends from the shelter of thick, turbulent dust. It lets itself fall toward the governing mass, the black hole itself. Then it arrests its descent with out-stretched wings of mirrors. They bank gracefully on the photon breeze.

Its lenses swivel to select prey. There a pack of photovores has clumped, disregarding ageless programming, or perhaps caught in a magnetic flux tube. The cause does not matter. The predator eases down along the axis of the galaxy itself.

Here, navigation is simple. Far below, the rotational pole of the Eater of All Things is a pinprick of absolute black at the center of a slowly revolving, incandescent disk.

The clustered photovores sense a descending presence. Their vast sailing herds cleave, peeling back to reveal deeper planes of burnt-gold light seekers. They all live to ingest light and excrete microwave beams.

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Their internal world revolves around ingestion, considered digestion, and orderly excretion.

These placid conduits now flee. But those clumped near the axis have little angular momentum, and cannot pivot on a magnetic fulcrum. Dimly they sense their destiny. Their hissing microwaves waver.

Some plunge downward, hoping that the predator will not follow so close to the Eater. Others cluster ever more, as if numbers give safety. The opposite is true.

The metallovore folds its mirror wings. Now angular and swift, accelerating, it mashes a few of the herd on its carapace. It scoops them in with flux lines. Metal harvesters rip the photovores. Shreds rush down burnt-black tunnels. Electrostatic fields separate elements and alloys.

Fusion fires await the ruined carcasses. There the separation can be exquisitely tuned, yielding pure ingots of any alloy desired. In the last analysis, the ultimate resources here are mass and light. The photovores lived for light, and now they end as mass.

The sleek metallovore never deigns to notice the layers of multitudes peeling back, their gigahertz cries of panic. They are plankton. It ingests them without registering their songs, their pain, their mortal fears.

Yet the metallovore, too, is part of an intricate balance. If it and its kind were lost, the community orbiting the Eater would decay to a less diverse state, one of monotonous simplicity, unable to adjust to the Eater's vagaries. Less energy would be harnessed, less mass recovered.

The metallovore prunes less efficient photovores. Its ancient codes, sharpened over time by natural selection, prefer the weak. Those who have slipped into unproductive orbits are easier to catch. It also prefers the savor of those who have allowed their receptor planes to tarnish with succulent trace elements, spewed up by the hot accretion disk below. The metallovore spots these by their mottled, dusky hue.

Each frying instant, millions of such small deaths shape the mechsphere.

Predators abound, and parasites. Here and there on the metallovore's polished skin are limpets and barnacles. These lumps of orange-brown and soiled yellow feed on chance debris from the prey. They can lick at the passing winds of matter and light. They purge the metallovore of unwanted elements — wreckage and dust which can jam even the most robust mechanisms, given time.

All this intricacy floats on the pressure of photons. Light is the fluid

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here, spilling up from the blistering storms far below in the great grinding disk. This rich harvest supports the mechsphere which stretches for hundreds of cubic light years, its sectors and spans like armatures of an unimaginable city.

All this, centered on a core of black oblivion, the dark font of vast wealth.

Inside the rim of the garish disk, oblivious to the weather here, whirls a curious blotchy distortion in the fabric of space and time. It is called by some the Wedge, for the way it is jammed in so close. Others term it the Labyrinth.

It seems to be a small refraction in the howling virulence. Sitting on the very brink of annihilation, it advertises its artificial insolence.

Yet it lives on. The mote orbits perpetually beside the most awful natural abyss in the galaxy: the Eater of All Things.

Intelligent machines would build atop this ferment a society we could scarcely fathom — but we would try. Much of the next novel I wrote, *Furious Gulf*, was about that — the gulf around a black hole, and the gulf between intelligences born of different realms.

For years I had enjoyed long conversations with a friend, noted artificial intelligence theorist Marvin Minsky, about the possible lines of evolution of purely machine intelligence. Marvin views our concern with mortality and individualism as a feature of biological creatures, unnecessary among intelligences which never had to pass through our Darwin-nowing filter.

If we can copy ourselves indefinitely, why worry about a particular copy? What kind of society would emerge from such origins? What would it think of us — we Naturals, still hobbled by biological destiny?

A slowly emerging theme in the novels, then, was how intelligence depended on the "substrate," the basic building blocks. Machines could embody intelligence, but their styles would be different.

Angular antennas reflect the bristling ultraviolet of the disk below. Shapes revolve. They live among clouds of infalling mass — swarthy, shredding under a hail of radiation: infrared spikes, cutting gamma rays.

Among the dissolving clouds move silvery figures whose form alters to suit function. Liquid metal flows, firms. A new tool extrudes: matted titanium. It works at a deposit of rich indium. Chewing, digesting.

The harvesters swoop in long ellipses, high above the hard bril-

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liance of the disk. As they swarm they strike elaborate arrays, geometric matrices. Their volume-scavenging strategy is self-evolved, purely practical, a simple algorithm. Yet it generates intricate patterns which unfurl and perform and then curl up again in artful, languorous beauty.

They have another, more profound function. Linked, they form a macro-antenna. In a single-voiced chorus they relay complex trains of digital thought. Never do they participate in the cross-lacing streams of careful deliberation, any more than molecules of air care for the sounds they transmit.

Across light-minutes the conversation billows and clashes and rings. A civilization blooms on the brink of the deepest abyss in Creation.

By the time I reached the last volume, in 1992, I had spent over twenty years slowly building up my ideas about machine intelligence, guided by friends like Marvin. I had also published several papers on the galactic center, am working on a further model for the Snake, and still eagerly read each issue of *Astrophysical Journal* for further clues.

Much remains to be found there. My nephew, now a doctoral student at Caltech, will make a thorough map of the center in 1995, using a detector he built to view light wavelengths shorter than a millimeter — he's caught the bug.

I finished the last novel, *Sailing Bright Eternity*, in summer 1994. It had been twenty-four years since I started on the series and our view of the galactic center had changed enormously. Some parts of the first two books, especially, are not representative of current thinking. Error goes with the territory.

I had taken many imaginative leaps in putting together a working "ecology" for the center, including truly outré ideas, such as constructions made by forcing space-time itself into compressed forms, which in turn act like mass itself: reversing Einstein's intuition, that matter curved space-time. All this was great fun, requiring a lot of time to think. I let my subconscious do most of the work, if possible. It's an easier way to write; but it stretches out projects, too. Occasionally I wanted to say to long-suffering readers, who wrote in asking when the next volume would appear, "Sorry; I'm writing as fast as I can."

Doubtless there are many more surprises ahead. We're extending our gaze into ever more distant frequencies, gaining better resolution, seeing finer detail. In peeling back the

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onion skins, we get closer to how galaxies work, how the vast outbursts of their centers affect life, and how the truly bright galactic cores, quasars, work.

My own model is quite possibly completely wrong. It seems to explain some features (the filaments, the Snake) but has trouble with the jets. Eventually, comparing radio maps over time, we might see flareups and changes in the threads. Mine is strictly done in what I call the "cartoon approximation" —good enough for a first cut, maybe, but doomed to fail somewhere.

In any case, models are like art, matters of taste. Nobody expects a French impressionist painting to look much like a real cow; it suggests ways of looking at cows.

Is there life at the center? Nobody knows, but nobody can rule it out. Only by thinking about possibilities can we test them. My first intuition, seeing the radio map of the Arch, was, *This looks artificial.* Maybe it is — you had probably thought of *that* explanation halfway through this piece. Astronomy reflexively assumes that everything in the night sky is natural. Someday, that may prove wrong.

One of the ways science fiction looks at the world is by pushing it to extremes, asking the questions that go beyond the bounds of what we can observe and check now. Imagination is no mere foot soldier; it wants to fly. That's why science fiction and science are forever linked.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.

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Madeleine Robins has published several novels, and now works as an editor for Acclaim Comics. She last appeared in F&SF in July of 1994 with an historical fantasy. This time she returns with an odd bit of sf.

When Madeleine sent us this story, she billed it as "an sf story about two women and a lip." It is that, and oh, so much more.

Abelard's Kiss

By Madeleine E. Robins

BEATRICE'S LOVER WAS MADE of lip. She wouldn't say more, just smiled, delicately tracing the edge of her glass with one finger. Susannah, more than anyone else there, knew Beatrice's theatricality, her beautifully detailed gestures. Susannah, more than anyone else there, knew that to give way to her curiosity was to give way to Beatrice.

Still, "Lip, Beatrice?" she murmured, trying to sound wry and doubtful.

"Uh huh." Beatrice's smile broadened and shone on Susannah; she finished her wine and turned to get more.

Was she the only one in Renata's living room who had heard Beatrice? Susannah wondered. Or did the others take the casual statement as an example, either of Beatrice's extravagance or of her hyperbole? No one but Susannah seemed particularly interested. And beside the delicious, disturbing image of Beatrice's lover there was only one thought in Susannah's mind: not to show Beatrice that she was intrigued. Captivated. Hooked again, like the old days.

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"Wanna see something?" Beatrice would whisper. They were sammies then, refugee kids at a Samaritan school after the Big Everything, the disaster of '19 which had wiped out so much of New York City. "It'll cost you a halfie." And Susannah had found the half-dollar coin hidden in her pocket and given it to Beatrice, and had been permitted to view the dead cat or the page torn from an old porn magazine or, once, the body of a bum who had frozen to death outside the school the night before.

"Wanna see something?" Beatrice would whisper. And every time, every damned time she fell for it.

Even now, twenty-five years later. The most Susannah had learned to do was look indifferent so that the others at the party — friends of Renata's, who was a sammie too — wouldn't notice her fascination.

Later, when the party was breaking up, Beatrice offered Sue a ride back to Manhattan by way of Tamerlane. "I have to stop home, anyway. Come in, I'll give you some real coffee."

Susannah opened her mouth to say no, and was unsurprised to hear herself say Yes. Old habit, old captivations. She followed Beatrice up to the copter on Renata's roof.

"I've named it Abelard," Beatrice said as she fastened her seatbelt.

"Why not Dante?" Susannah asked, trying to play the game.

"Too obvious." Beatrice smiled, a whiteness glittering in the dusk. She flicked a row of switches and the copter hummed to life. In the fading daylight and the green glow of the instrument panel, Beatrice looked unearthly, vivid and perfect, her long fingers manipulating the toggles and dials expertly.

"Besides," she added once they were up in the air. "Abelard sounds sexier." It certainly did the way Beatrice said it, a sigh rolled along the tongue.

For ten minutes Susannah fought the temptation to ask, "Where did it come from?" Finally, unasked, Beatrice said, "I had him made for me. One of the bioengineering places squeezed my order in between batches of interferon or something. I understand it isn't hard to do. Just expensive." Beatrice lingered on the word. "A parent tissue, a little fuddling with DNA, program in some instincts...." Her voice was an elegant drawl, only her smile in the near-darkness was lewd. "There's only one in the world, and it's mine."

"Beatie — " Susannah murmured.

"I know you'll keep this a secret, love. It's not breaking the law, but...bending it a little."

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Susannah stared into the deepening gloom. Below them scavenger boats fished scrap metal from the Long Island Sound; to the right in the distance the squat buildings of the rebuilt South Bronx Hospice glittered silently. After their hungry, grubby childhood, Susannah had continued on to college, gone to work, built up a small independence for herself. Grubbed for money, Beatrice said, and shook her head. *Her* path had been very different. Beatrice had worked only as long as it took to find, and marry, Felix Ferrar-Giroux, one of the mysteriously wealthy men who had emerged after the Everything. He took her home to Tamerlane, a huge house on the Sound that unfolded like a tesseract, disclosing rooms where none could logically be, and there Beatrice learned to spend his money. He encouraged her extravagances as if he were feeding a rare bird. No impulse too wild, no whim too expensive. Including, it appeared, this new extravagance.

I will keep my mouth shut, Susannah thought grimly. I will look at her new toy — despite herself a flush of warmth spread through her at the thought — and then I will go home.

At Tamerlane they were met at the door by a superior-looking manservant who took Susannah's three-year-old cloth coat with as much ceremony as he did Beatrice's fur. Beatrice led Sue to a small den and poured wine for them both.

"You must relax, Susah! You take everything so seriously. There, drink that. Why *are* you so edgy?"

"I'm not edgy, but I have work at home I need to get through tonight."

"Susah, you can't let work rule your life," Beatrice said irritably.

"I don't let it rule my life, Beatrice — "

"What else rules your life, then? You haven't had a lover since whatsisname walked out — "

"Greg," Susannah whispered.

Beatrice made no sign of hearing. "You *won't* enjoy yourself, you act like you haven't earned the right. That's the difference between us: you think you haven't *earned* anything. I *know* I've earned everything I can lay my hands on. We survived, Susah. We're alive. We don't owe anyone anything. *I* don't, anyway." Beatrice raked her hair back from her broad forehead with one hand and looked up at the ceiling. "Why do I bother? Come on, love. Let's go meet Abelard."

They went down a string of corridors, stopping just as Susannah began to get seriously lost. The room Beatrice led Sue into was almost empty,

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uncarpeted, dimly lit, painted a shining white. The floor was a parquet pattern, doubtless of real wood. There was a clean soft smell to the air, like talc or running water; two lush throw rugs and a futon in the corner, a fern hanging in a ceramic pot. Nothing stirred.

Beatrice crossed the room. "Shut the door behind you, Susah." Then she went through a door at the far side of the room. Susannah had a moment to look around curiously, breathe the sweet air, wait for revelation.

"Come on, precious. Come on, sweetie-pie." Beatrice stood in the doorway a moment to assure herself of Susannah's attention before she reentered the room. Something moist and gibbous squirmed uneasily into the room behind her, moving by throwing its weight forward, falling and rolling over until it "stood" again. It was ovoid, dull red, strangely plastic, with a faint sheen that gave no impression of sliminess. *Ugh,* Susannah thought, but was unable to take her eyes away as the thing rolled after Beatrice like a puppy after its master, struggling with that sidling somersault to keep up with Beatrice's elegant long stride.

"Abelard." Beatrice stopped in the center of the room, one palm extended to present the thing to Susannah. With the other hand she reached caressingly down to it and it responded, stretching upward in an effort to reach her circling finger. At last they touched, and the thing grew round her finger, nursed it. For the first time in all the years she had known Beatrice, Susannah saw her entirely captivated, not thinking of the next moment or the next, caught entirely in the present, all attention focused in that one finger.

The mood was contagious. Susannah's faint revulsion at her first sight of the thing dissipated. She felt a warmth and sweet laziness born of the fragrant humidity of the room and the unsettlingly erotic sight of the creature suckling Beatrice's manicured finger. She sighed quietly in the stillness.

"Do you want to touch him?" Beatrice's voice sounded abnormally loud.

Susannah tried to make her murmured Yes seem casual. She stepped near, reached out a finger and touched, tentatively, at the side of the lover. "Abelard?" she murmured. The thing did not move toward her, but it did not move away, either. Sue pushed her finger a little harder. The surface of the lover was warm, firmer than she had expected. Like lip. It gave slightly, then closed around her fingertip and nursed at it, tasted it. Susannah felt a string of electric pulses ripple up her spine; the flesh surrounding hers was damp and warm and faintly pulsing.

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"I thought you'd like him," Beatrice said smugly. At the sound of her voice Abelard released its grip on Susannah's finger, dropped away and shrank back, its rolling weight carrying it toward Beatrice. "Hello, Pet," Beatrice crooned. "Is devoted to Beatie, isn't it? Is got Beatie under its skin, hasn't it?" She ran a caressing palm flat along one side of Abelard's top while Susannah, shivering in the warm air, tried to regain her composure. Then, abruptly, Beatrice pulled away from the lover and turned to the door. "Come on, Susah."

Susannah followed, trying to ignore the tremor that lingered in her arms and breasts and knees, making walking a shaky, uncertain chore. From the doorway she took one backward look and saw Abelard, shrunken and forlorn, abandoned in the center of the room.

"Potter will move it back to the tank later." Beatrice waved a vague hand in the direction of the room as they moved up the hall.

"Tank?"

"It spends most of its time in a nutrient bath. Or something. I told the people at Bioform I didn't want to know particulars, they're so unromantic. Potter takes care of him. *It.* Now, I promised you real coffee, didn't I?"

Susannah had forgotten about the work she had waiting in Manhattan. She followed Beatrice mutely back to the sitting room where a lavish meal, with the promised coffee, had been laid out. Through the meal and the copter ride into the city, where Beatrice landed on the roof of Susannah's building in violation of any number of ordinances, through the rest of the evening and the next day, Susannah was haunted by the memory, the teasing sensation of that warm flesh suckling at her finger. Which was just what Beatrice wanted, she told herself scornfully. An audience, someone to want what she has.

Which is just what Susannah wanted.

SUE SAW Beatrice irregularly, now and then at Renata's house in Connecticut, sometimes at a restaurant in the city for lunch. With her usual perversity Beatrice did not mention Abelard, but sometimes in the midst of talking she would break off in mid-sentence and smile deliciously into space for a moment, then start theatrically, "What was I saying?" Sue believed these lapses were contrived for her benefit, but that didn't diminish their power.

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She was grimly certain that Beatrice understood that all too well, and was grimly determined to show herself unmoved.

Other than lunches with Beatrice, parties or weekends at Renata's, or her occasional work-related social duties, Susannah didn't seek out contacts, friends, lovers. Her last man had decamped more than a year before, in a shower of mutual accusation and disappointment, and Susannah couldn't nerve herself to try again, even approach trying again. Too messy, certain to fail, just not worth it, she said to Renata when she asked about Susannah's love life. To Beatrice she said she was too busy to think about sex, let alone love. She was not quite busy enough to forget the unsettling image of Beatrice's lover, nor the ghost sensation of the thing sucking on her own finger, even after months had gone by.

One day, several months after the visit to Tamerlane, Beatrice called her at work, arranged to meet for lunch. She bubbled and enthused, every word was an event, and by the time she put the phone down Susannah knew that Beatrice had some new extravagance and needed an audience. Needed *her*. She made arrangements to take an extra hour for lunch; her superiors looked kindly on her lunches with Beatrice Ferrar-Giroux.

They met at a small restaurant in the rehabilitated section of the east Fifties. The place had not yet been discovered by anyone but Beatrice, who would relentlessly drag it into fashion and then tire of it. Today she was dressed like a wealthy gypsy, scarves and beads and skirts layered around her so that she looked half-buried in bright fabric. Her hair was in dark ringlets this time. She looked beautiful, elegant, radiantly pleased with herself and the world, and Susannah immediately loathed her own blue suit, which that morning had seemed fashionable and attractive, and her simply dressed dark hair.

"Susannah!" Beatrice rose and enveloped Susannah in a spicy, overwhelming embrace full of foreign enthusiasms and endearments. Susannah returned it carefully, fearful of disturbing Beatrice's artful disarray.

Before the first drink had arrived Beatrice was launched on an epic, a saga of her life since they had last met. By the time the second drink and the faux salmon appeared Beatrice had arrived at the crux of her story. A new lover, a man. He was beautiful, he was bright and shining, incredibly sensual, a gypsy, a madman. He had been, until Beatrice discovered him, a gardener at Tamerlane.

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"Who's doing the garden now?" Sue asked dryly. Beatrice blinked, laughed, and went on. By the time the consommé arrived Beatrice had descended from flowery abstracts to coarse particulars. Susannah listened in silence.

It was not until the waiter served the veal and poured more wine that Susannah could get a word in edgewise. "What's going to happen to Abelard?"

Beatrice looked at her blankly for a moment. Then, "Oh God, that's right. I hadn't even thought. Well, after all, Susah, it's only a blob, isn't it? I'll have to tell Potter to take it back to Bioform."

Beatrice was paying for the meal; it was not often that Susannah could afford real meat, let alone cheese and fruit and wine this good. She ate every bite. It tasted like dust. Over coffee she asked, "What will Bioform do with him?"

It took Beatrice a moment to understand what Susannah was talking about.

"Put it back in the vat or something, I suppose. Recycle the ingredients. Something. Really, Susannah," Beatrice drawled. "It was only a toy."

She wasn't expected to care, Susannah knew. She was supposed to change fascinations as Beatrice did, just one step behind. She shook her head and changed the subject back to Beatrice's new lover.

When they were putting on their coats, Beatrice regarded Susannah with the old look: satisfaction wanting to flaunt itself. "Susah, you must come meet him. When can you come out to Tamerlane?"

She faltered, thinking of the work on her desk, the reports in her briefcase waiting to be taken home. Then Susannah surprised herself. "Tonight. I can come tonight, after work." And do what? Fight free of the place with Abelard tucked under one arm? Ridiculous. Still, "Tonight," she said.

"I won't say good-bye, then," Beatrice said. "I'll pick you up at six!" She smiled again, suddenly irresistible and childlike. "Ooo, Susah, wait till you see!" And then was gone.

Flying out to Tamerlane, Susannah let Beatrice's chatter wash over her like warm, scented water. Potter waited at the door to receive their coats and lead them to a different small den. Susannah wondered briefly if Beatrice had a suite of rooms for each lover she took: row on row of white rooms with the

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smell of running water and one green vine in a white ceramic pot. She settled herself in a deep soft chair and sipped wine, thinking. A young man, very tall and muscular, with a face of masculine prettiness and a slow, assured walk, joined them. Susannah noted that he was as besotted with Beatrice as she was with him.

"Susannah, this is John." Beatrice pulled the young man down to sit beside her on the sofa; their fingers found occasions to touch, and the air between them rippled as though superheated. Susannah looked away uncomfortably, embarrassed. When Potter announced a call for Beatrice the lovers rose together and left the room. Potter looked at Susannah as if she were part of some vulgar conspiracy, then he too left. Susannah could hear Beatrice's soft murmuring from the antechamber, the click of the phoneset replaced in its cradle, but neither Beatrice nor John returned. She thought she heard more murmurings, the soft sighing of silk against skin and skin against skin. Her face warmed as she realized that Beatrice meant her to hear, wanted her to hear. *Probably thought it was a great gift to her poor friend Susah,* she thought in disgust.

She rose and left the room. If anyone stopped her, she would say she was looking for the lavatory. No one stopped her. It took her three tries to find the right corridor, the right door. When she entered the room she found it empty; the futon and white rugs had been rolled up and piled on one side, the vine trailed unwatered from its dusty pot. The air was still and musty. She walked across the bare floor and opened the door to the inner room carefully, afraid she might startle the creature.

It was flattened, submerged in a shallow plastiglass tank that brimmed with viscous pink fluid. It looked like photographs Susannah had seen of human hearts prepared for transplant; there was something lonely and pathetic about it. *Ugh,* she thought. *How could anyone* — but Susannah thought she knew how. She stood very still, just inside the room, listening to her own pulse and breathing, watching the faint pulse of the lover in its tank. She was only aware that Potter had entered the room behind her when he cleared his throat.

"I was only looking — " she began.

Potter regarded her steadily and said nothing.

"I mean, it's horrible, just putting the poor thing back in some sort of vat, as if it were clay or something. I mean — " she faltered. "When does he — it — go?"

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Potter smiled thinly. "When Madame remembers to instruct me."

Susannah nodded, still staring at Abelard in the tank. "I just mean, well, it was made deliberately. It seems so awful to just destroy it. It must feel something...."

"You want it," Potter stated baldly.

"It should be *saved*," Susannah corrected. She kept her gaze fixed on the lover. "We can't just let Beatrice throw it out. It's alive. It just seems...." She faded off. The only sound in the room was a faint hiss and bubble from the tank.

Then, "We might arrange something," Potter said. He closed the door behind them, shutting them into the humid, medicinal-smelling room with the creature. "Something could be arranged," he repeated. Susannah looked at him as he told her what.

They negotiated. As Potter made his offer and Susannah her counter offer, she thought of the warm sucking at her finger, the firm plastic surface of the lover. Her breath came faster as she calculated her slender resources, the money she had saved for years, hoping to buy an apartment larger than her cramped two-room. She thought of little economies she could make, freelance work, extra income.

When she left the white suite Susannah and Potter had come to an agreement.

All the way back to Manhattan, riding with Beatrice in the copter, Susannah was aware of a new sensation, a smugness Beatrice herself would have recognized. She had taken something from Beatrice, and Beatie would never know it. It would be her own.

Susannah spent her lunch hour at the bank the next day, transferring money to the account Potter had named. As she wrote the figures out Susannah had a brassy taste in her mouth, a moment of cautionary fear: *What am I doing?* Then sanity was overwhelmed by the rising image, the image she had lived with for months now, of the lover at her fingertip, nursing gently. Susannah signed the bank chit recklessly and went back to work.

Potter was early. When the security guard at her building door called up for clearance Susannah was still eating dinner. She looked quickly around her apartment, a painfully neat room on which she had lavished all her energy, choosing fabrics and art that would create a sense of space and graciousness. Except for the dark wood folding table on which her dinner sat half-eaten, the apartment was in order. She went to the door to wait.

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"Good evening, Miss." Potter might have been opening the door at Tamerlane for her, rather than she for him.

"Good evening," Susannah replied seriously.

It took only a few minutes to move the shrouded cart across the room, slide the tank as gently as possible onto the floor, unstack the cans of nutrient fluid which Potter had brought along. "Part of the accouterments," he told her. Then he looked around the apartment once, shook his head as if his worst fears had been confirmed.

"Well, Miss," he said at the door. "I hope it gives you great...pleasure."

Susannah blushed. "I'm just trying—" she began. Gave that up. "Good night, Potter."

"I certainly hope so, Miss."

When he was gone, Susannah turned back to the apartment, seeing the drying track of fluid dribbled from the tank and the shifting sprawl of Abelard against the plastiglass walls. The tank and cans of fluid took up a space about a meter square, displacing an armchair she had stored away in the basement. Her heart beat so strongly she felt the pulse under her jaw. Susannah walked toward the tank. The pink fluid on the floor smeared greasily under her foot. But when she reached out a hand and touched the lover its surface was not greasy, scarcely even damp. At her touch, Abelard slowly stirred, enveloping her fingertip in warm, firm flesh, just as she remembered.

Susannah drew away. Some ritual was demanded. The lover sank down into its tank again while she cleared the dishes and started a bath. She soaked for a long time in water as hot as it ever got in her building, then toweled herself dry. When she could think of no further reason to delay, she set about her seduction.

First there was the clumsy process of getting Abelard out of the tank. The lover did not reach for her as it did to Beatrice, nor follow the sound of her murmurs, her heat and scent. But when touched it did respond, reaching upward to her. After a moment Susannah figured out how to use its weight to move it, letting the lover overbalance and roll forward over the beveled top of the tank wall. Even so, Susannah had to pull with both hands, palms flat against the malleable flesh, until the creature was wholly out of the tank. Susannah stared at her palms, which tingled from the contact.

Abelard waited, unmoving. Tentatively Susannah reached out again and touched it, stroking the warm surface. The flesh of the lover kissed her hand,

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rising to follow the line of her arm, nibbling tenderly at the soft skin of the inner elbow. Susannah sighed, shifted from kneeling to sitting, pushed gently at Abelard's surface with her free hand until it was enveloped in soft, suckling tissue. The lover was warm like the touch of breath against her skin. Seen closely its surface was a dusty rose, lined, porous and unappealing; after a moment Susannah closed her eyes. Then there was only the touch, the slow sliding pressure on her arms, a kissing of flesh on flesh.

In the still of the room there was the faint singing of her breath and nothing else. She floated from touch to touch at the lover's whim; there was nothing to do but be there, be touched. No responsibility for the lover's pleasure, no necessity for talk or reassurance. Just her own sensations, intoxicating. Abelard swarmed over her, nuzzling and kissing, rocking her gently in the first orgasm, clinging warmly.

Gradually the stroking at her throat, her breasts, her inner thighs and labia became more insistent, probing. The lover seemed to absorb the energy of her arousal, feeding on it. Susannah was once distantly aware of how strange it was to have no one to hold on to, no shoulders or buttocks to knead. When she stroked the lover its skin kissed back, another sensation, distracting, and after a moment or two she let her hands fall to her sides.

The lover went on stroking, probing, kissing, shape-changing. Susannah grew tired, overexcited and raw. Her languor turned into heavy-limbed paralysis: it was impossible even to shudder away from the ceaseless warm caress that went on and on. At last, dizzy to fainting, Susannah rolled away from the lover, shivering in the sudden uncovered cool of the room. She lay for a long time, boneless, flushed and exhausted against the pillows. When she turned over she saw Abelard; vaguely forlorn, returned to its squat ovoid shape. She knew she should put it back in its tank again — how long since she had coaxed it out? — but it was still difficult to move.

Finally she did rise from the floor, pulling on a robe, to attend to the lover, urging it back toward the tank and, at the last, pushing it over the shallow rim again into the nutrient bath. At the first touch of her hands the creature began its slow kissing again. Susannah felt as if every cell in her body was electrified by sensory memory; after the quick shove it took to up-end Abelard into the tank, she pulled away, panting again, waiting for the electric charge to dissipate. Foggy with surfeit she sank back to the floor. After a while she drifted to sleep where she lay.

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AT WORK THE next day Susannah was tired and stiff. She found herself drifting into daydreams, her eyelids suddenly heavy and her mouth pursed in a soft "o" as if by surprise. Pressing her legs together she could summon up a flush of physical memory that was momentarily incapacitating. She felt a little drunk; she smiled often. At the stroke of five she cleared her desk and left.

Somehow she expected her apartment to be changed, tinted pink or filled with musky scent, something exotic. It was the same two small rooms, her careful decorating scheme knocked awry by the tank in the corner. Susannah allowed herself a brief glance at the lover, then committed herself to ritual: dinner, small chores, a bath, all prolonging the expectation. Finally, when she could not distract herself further, she took Abelard from the tank.

It was as it had been the night before: soft caressing flesh, ripplings of sensation, her body bathed in warm kisses. Even when the pleasure began to mix with pain she could not stop, convinced by her body that the final sensation, the perfect sensation, was only a moment away. When languor gave over to exhaustion, sensation which broke itself, pleasure which hurt too much to bear, Susannah rolled away shaking, listening to her heart pound in the silence of the room.

In the next few days Susannah developed dark patches under her eyes, and a staccato way of talking. It was impossible for her to be in the apartment and not eventually succumb to the lover's allure. Beatrice called and Susannah said guiltily that she had no time for lunch. Renata called and Susannah pleaded a head cold. At home it piqued her that Abelard still had to be coaxed to her. She remembered the way the creature had yearned toward Beatrice's hand, her voice. What had Beatrice said? That it was programmed to respond to her physical chemistry. In time, Susannah thought, the lover would learn *her* chemistry, respond to her, not Beatrice.

Abelard had been in her apartment for a week when Susannah noticed a callus, a small rough patch on its surface. When she touched the patch the lover responded instantly, sucking gently at her finger.

"No, sweetie," she murmured absently. Concerned, she checked the nutrient fluid, but it was the same clear, uncontaminated pink it was supposed to be. For a moment Susannah entertained thoughts of sexually transmitted diseases, explanations to doctors. "This is ridiculous," she

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chided the creature. "There is nothing wrong with you." Still, when she took him from the tank that evening she made sure the leathery patch was turned away from her.

The next night the patch seemed larger.

Beatrice called again, insisting upon lunch. They met, embraced, and Beatrice was launched into her narrative before they had taken their seats. This time, though, there was a difference. After a few minutes, Beatrice broke off and stared curiously at Susannah.

"All right, what is it?" she asked.

Susannah trembled. "What is what?"

"Susah, you're off in neverland somewhere, you haven't heard a thing I've said. It must be something. You've met a man! Tell me."

"I haven't met a man." Susannah was enjoying herself.

"All right, a woman, then. *Tell.*"

"I haven't met anyone, Beatrice. I spend my nights quietly at home." Susannah smiled seraphically. Beatrice's frown was petulant.

"Well, don't tell me." Her bad humor lasted another few minutes and then was forgotten as she launched into gossip about her gardener-lover at Tamerlane, about Felix and their parties. By the end of lunch she had talked herself into charity with Susannah again: "You must come out to Tamerlane soon. I'll even find a gardener for you."

Susannah smiled politely. They embraced again and she turned away. Behind her she felt Beatrice watching curiously, for once in all their lives the puzzled one.

That night as the lover churned over her body Susannah was suddenly aware of the complete silence, the lack of another breath contrapuntal to hers, no words, no noise at all. Later, when she rolled Abelard back into the tank, she found two new leathery patches, and the first was definitely larger, and cracking faintly. Before she left for work the next morning Susannah examined the lover. It seemed shrunken to her, slightly withered. This time she opened two cans of nutrient and recklessly dumped them into the tank. As her hand grazed the lover it nestled sluggishly. Poor thing, she thought. Up close in the light of day it was really kind of awful looking.

She was late at work, haranguing with a customer in Zurich over duty compensation; when she got home she had only enough energy to wash her face and fall into bed with a curious sense of relief. She did remember to check

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Abelard for further sores then or in the morning. All day she was conscious of an edginess; that night, for the first time, she did not bother with her rituals but pulled off her clothes and tumbled the lover out of its tank as soon as she arrived home. She did not really look at it until later, afterward. The firm, pliant skin was scaly and withered, as if the creature itself had shrunk inside its flesh. The first of the calluses was cracked and oozing faintly. Susannah hurriedly pushed the lover into the tank and went to shower the touch of it from her. She did feel some brief compunction, and dropped more fluid into the already brimming tank before she went to sleep.

The lover was dull brown by morning and the fluid in the tank was contaminated with small particles. Susannah was horrified, thinking of the touch of that thing on her body only hours before.

When she got home the lover was dead.

Susannah knew it the moment she opened the door; there was no smell, but a sense of presence in the apartment was abruptly not there. Abelard floated in the tank, shriveled and dark, strands of peeling skin suspended in the murky fluid that surrounded it. Susannah wanted to close and lock the door to her apartment and disappear.

It took her a while to think what to do. Finally Susannah dragged the lover out of the tank and wrapped it in an old towel. Its withered form was surprisingly light and much smaller than it had been alive. Clutching the bundle tightly to her chest, she carried it down seven flights to the garbage room in the basement. Then she pushed it away from her violently, heaving the creature and the towel into a trash can. The sight of the gray-brown husk half hidden by terry cloth in the bottom of the can was the final straw. Susannah fled, weeping, back to her apartment. It was some time before she thought to empty the tank of its tainted nutrient and bring it, and the remaining cans of fluid, down to the basement.

Then Susannah went into some kind of mourning, reducing her already small world to a simple loop of work and sleep. She lost weight, the former tidiness of her apartment declined into dusty clutter. She saw no one outside of work. The thought of people dismayed her. Friends called, Beatrice and Renata, an old boyfriend back in town, a man from work. Susannah left the phone off the hook and fell asleep each night to the rhythmic whine of the signal. Daily she watched what she was doing

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to herself and was appalled, but inertia overweighed everything and nothing changed.

At last Renata got through to her. A party at her place in Connecticut. Susannah would have to come, someone would certainly give her a lift out. Of all the people she had known from the Samaritan school, emphatic, generous Renata was the one Susannah liked best, feared least, and was most likely to ignore. But today Renata used her most persuasive voice and best blandishments. Perhaps, Susannah thought, it was time to go out.

Renata was delighted. "Wonderful, wonderful! Listen, Beatie's coming, I'll tell her to give you a ride out. Wonderful! Wear something nice, sweetie. There will be some lovely men."

Men. Susannah was not ready to consider the idea. And of all the people in the world Beatrice was the last one with whom she wanted to ride out to Connecticut. She thought of calling back and canceling, but the habit of inaction was just too strong. It was easier, finally, to just go.

Beatrice was chattering before Susannah had closed the door of the copter: how had she been, where had she been, why all the mystery? "You look marvelous, Susah, so thin! But you just dropped out of sight. I was right, wasn't I? You had a new lover? My God, love, it's been months since I've seen you."

Susannah agreed that it had been months, and stared stolidly down at the forest of spires below them, the slowly reemerging Manhattan skyscape.

"I should have tried harder to get hold of you, I know," Beatrice went on, expertly guiding the copter east over the Sound. "We've been all at sixes and sevens out at the house, even poor Felix had to get tangled up in it. Can you imagine? We had to fire Potter."

Susannah felt a hollowness in her stomach, as if the copter had suddenly made a two hundred foot drop. "Fire Potter? Why?"

"God, Susah, he'd been taking advantage — they all do, it's expected, up to a point. But Potter overstepped the bounds." Beatrice's long eyebrows arched in amusement. "Do you know, he actually took it upon himself to throw out my little toy? You know, that thing I had made — "

"Abelard," Susannah whispered.

"God, *Abelard.* What a memory you have. Felix was convinced that Potter had sold the poor little thing on the black market, but I can't imagine anyone buying it."

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Susannah stared straight ahead. What did Beatrice know? Was this one of her dreadful teasing games?

"I mean, there wouldn't have been any point," Beatrice continued.

She's waiting, Susannah thought, for me to pick up my cues. "Why not?" she asked.

"It couldn't have been used by anyone but me, love. Not for long, anyway. It was made for me. Touching anyone else that way would have poisoned it, like an allergy. Potter knew that, the Bioform people told him, for heaven's sake. He knew there was no point in anyone buying it. Unless he sold it as food, and that's too revolting a thought even — "

Susannah leaned against the door of the copter, wishing it would open and drop her into the water five hundred feet below. Beatrice went on and on and on. Susannah didn't listen. She was concentrating on not throwing up as the copter dipped and canted in the early evening breeze. In her mind she played over the picture of the lover, of Abelard, draped in her bathroom towel and discarded in the trash.

Renata was waiting for them, chivvied them into her small house, already packed with people. "Susannah, sweetie, you look like death. You were airsick, weren't you? Beatie, you fly that damned thing like a maniac. Go take off that dreadful fur and find yourself a drink." She pulled Susannah into a bathroom.

"Really, Susie, are you all right? Do you want to talk?" Her arm around Susannah's shoulders, Renata sat them both down on the side of the tub. Distantly Susannah felt the warmth and weight of Renata's arm around her. "Susie?"

Susannah shook her head, afraid to speak. Finally she managed, "Fighting off a bug or something. I'll be okay. Thank you."

Renata squeezed her again, then stood up. "All right, Susie. You don't have to tell me what it is, but fix yourself up and come out as soon as you can, will you? This is a party, love. You're here to...to part." She smiled with pleasure at her own silliness, kissed Susannah's cheek and left her.

Susannah stared around the blue and white lavatory, at the embroidered hand towels and sculpted soap. Here to part. With what? With Beatrice? Maybe, after all these years. Maybe. With Abelard? Another wave of deep nausea: she had killed Beatrice's lover, she had been deadly, the damned thing had died giving her pleasure.

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She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was pasty white; she splashed in icy water until some color returned to her face, then pushed at her hair until it fell a little more softly about her face, so that some of the stricken look diminished to mere fragility. Come out as soon as you can, Renata had said.

She thought of the lover, of the cool silence in her apartment, the safety of it. Then, with sudden warmth, she wanted caring, the human clamor that filled Renata's hallway, the sticky, confusing, demanding and personal world outside the bathroom door. Friendships. Chaos. Love. It was time to go out. As she opened the door she thought she felt something warm at the nape of her neck. A brush of memory like Abelard's kiss.

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Esther M. Friesner's newest novel, The Psalms of Herod, *(White Wolf) is far-future science fiction that goes way beyond the ideas explored in Margaret Atwood's* The Handmaiden's Tale.

Esther seems to be concentrating on science fiction these days. Her story, "A Birthday," is unlike anything we've ever read before. Esther says she wrote it because she was angry.

A Birthday

By Esther M. Friesner

I WAKE UP KNOWING THAT this is a special day. Today is Tessa's birthday. She will be six. That means she will start school and I won't see her during the day at all.

My friends will have a party for Tessa and for me. The invitation sits on my bedside table, propped up against the telephone so I can't possibly forget it. I wish I could. There are pink pandas tumbling around the borders of the card and inside my friend Paula has written in the details of time and place in her beautiful handwriting. I get up, get dressed, get ready for the day ahead. Before I leave the apartment I make sure that I haven't locked Squeaker in the closet again. Squeaker is my cat. You'd think it would be hard for a cat to hide in a studio apartment, but Squeaker manages. Tessa loves cats and pandas, just like me. She told me so.

I am almost out the door when I remember the invitation. Tessa hasn't seen it yet. Today will be my last chance to show it to her. I keep forgetting to take it with me, not because I want to deprive my daughter of anything but

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because of what this birthday means to us both. I don't like to think about it. I tuck the invitation into my purse and go to work.

I arrive a little before nine. Mom always said I never plan ahead, but I do now. There are flowers on my desk at work, six pink fairy roses in a cut glass bud vase with a spill of shiny white ribbon tied around its neck. There is a freedom card propped open on the keyboard in front of my terminal, signed by most of the women in the office. I hang up my jacket and check my IN box for work, but there is nothing there, no excuse to turn on my terminal. Still, a good worker finds work to do even when there's none, and I do so want to touch the keys.

I sit down and reach for a sampler sheet to rub over my thumb and slip into the terminal. Damn, the pad's empty! I know I had some left yesterday; what happened? I can't turn on my terminal without giving it a sample of my cell-scrapings so the system knows it's me. Who's been getting at my things? I'll kill her!

No. I mustn't lose my temper like this. I have to set a good example for my girl. It's important for a woman to make peace, to compromise. No one wins a war. Maybe whoever took the last of my sampler sheets needed it more than I do. Maybe she had to stay late, work overtime, and everyone else locked their pads away in their desks so she had to help herself to mine.

"Good morning, Linda." It's my boss, Mr. Beeton. His melon face is shiny with a smile. "I see you've found my little surprise."

"Sir?" I say.

"Now, now, I know what day this is just as well as you do. Do you think the ladies are the only ones who want to wish you the best for the future? Just because there's a door on my office, it doesn't mean I'm sealed inside, ignorant of my girls' lives." He pats me on the back and says, "I'm giving you the day off, with pay. Have fun." And then he is gone, a walrus in a blue-gray suit waddling up the aisle between the rows of terminals.

I don't want to have the day off. What will I do?

Where will I go? The party isn't until six o'clock tonight. There is so much I need to say to her before then. I suppose I could go to the bank, but that's only ten seconds' worth of time. It's nowhere near enough. Here at work I could keep finding excuses to —

Mr. Beeton is at the end of the aisle, staring at me. He must be wondering why I'm still sitting here, staring at a blank screen. I'd better go. I put on my

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jacket and walk away from my terminal. It will still be here tomorrow. So will part of me.

I hear the murmurs as I walk to the door. The women are smiling at me as I pass, sad smiles, encouraging smiles, smiles coupled with the fleeting touch of a hand on mine. "I'm so happy for you," they say. "You're so strong."

"I've been praying for you."

"Have a good time."

"Have a good life."

"See you tomorrow."

But what will they see? I think about how many sick days I have left. Not enough. I will have to come back tomorrow, and I will have to work as if everything were still the same.

As I walk down the hall to the elevator I have to pass the Ladies' Room. I hear harsh sounds, tearing sounds.

Someone is in there, crying. I don't have to work today; I can take the time to go in and see who it is, what's wrong. Maybe I can help. Maybe this will kill some time.

The crying is coming from one of the stalls. "Who's there?" I call. The crying stops. There is silence, broken only by the drip of water from a faucet and a shallow, sudden intake of breath from the stall.

"What's wrong?" I ask. "Please, I can help you."

"Linda?" The voice is too fragile, too quavery for me to identify. "Is that you? I thought Beeton gave you the day off."

"He did," I tell whoever it is in there. "I was just on my way out."

"Go ahead, then." Now the voice is a little stronger, a little surer when giving a direct command. "Have fun." Another shudder of breath frays the edges of her words.

I think I know who it is in there now. Anyway, it's worth a guess. "Ms. Thayer?" What is she doing in here? The executives have their own bathrooms.

A latch flicks; the stall door swings open. Ms. Thayer is what I dreamed I'd be someday, back when I was a Business major freshman in college: a manager never destined to waste her life in the middle reaches of the company hierarchy, a comer and a climber with diamond-hard drive fit to cut through any glass ceiling her superiors are fool enough to place in her way. Sleekly groomed, tall and graceful in a tailored suit whose modest style still manages to let the world know it cost more than my monthly take-home pay,

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Ms. Thayer is a paragon. Every plane of expensive fabric lies just so along a body trimmed and toned and tanned to perfection. Only the front of her slim blue skirt seems to have rucked itself a little out of line. It bulges just a bit, as if — as if —

Oh.

"Would you like me to come with you?" I ask her. I don't need to hear confessions. "If it's today, I mean." If I'm wrong, she'll let me know.

She nods her head. Her nose is red and there is a little trace of slime on her upper lip. Her cheeks are streaked with red, her eyes squinched half-shut to hold back more tears. "I called," she tells me. "I have a four o'clock appointment. Upstairs, they think I'm going to the dentist."

"I'll meet you in the lobby, then, at three-thirty," I promise. And I add, because I know this is what she needs to hear more than anything, "It's not so bad." She squeezes my hand and flees back into the shelter of the stall. I hear the tears again, but they are softer this time. She is no longer so afraid.

I could take her sorrow from her as I took her fear by telling her there are ways to make what lies ahead a blessing, but I won't do that. She'd never believe me, anyhow. I know I would never have believed anyone when it was me. Besides, I was in college. I knew it all, better than anyone who'd been there, and the evening news was full of stories to back up my conviction that I'd chosen purgatory over hell. You're supposed to be able to survive purgatory.

I should have known better. Surviving isn't living, it's only breath that doesn't shudder to a stop, a heart that keeps lurching through beat after beat after beat long after it's lost all reason to keep on beating. I was wrong. But I was in college, Mom and Dad had given up so much to provide the difference between my meager scholarship and the actual cost of tuition, books, room and board. They said, "Make us proud."

When I dropped out in junior year and got this job as a secretary, they never said a word.

I think I need a cup of coffee. I know I need a place to sit and think about what I'll do to fill the hours between now and three-thirty, three-thirty and six. There's a nice little coffee shop a block from the office, so I go there and take a booth. The morning rush is over; no one minds.

The waitress knows me. Her name is Caroline. She is twenty-six, just two years older than me. Usually I come here for lunch at the counter, when

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there's lots of customers, but we still find time to talk. She knows me and I know her. Her pink uniform balloons over a belly that holds her sixth baby. She admires me for the way I can tease her about it. "Isn't that kid here *yet*?" I ask.

"Probably a boy," she answers. "Men are never on time." We both laugh.

"So how far along are you?"

"Almost there. You don't wanna know how close."

"No kidding? So why are you still — ?"

"Here? Working?" She laughs. "Like I've got a choice!" She takes my order and brings me my food. I eat scrambled eggs and bacon and toast soaked with butter. I drink three cups of coffee, black. I don't want to live forever. I leave Caroline a big tip because it's no joke having five — six kids to raise at today's prices, and a husband who doesn't earn much more than minimum wage.

I get a good idea while I am smearing strawberry jam over my last piece of toast: The Woman's Center. I do weekend volunteer work there, but there's no reason I can't go over today and see if they can use me. I'm free.

I try to hail a cab but all of them are taken, mostly by businessmen. Once I see an empty one sail past, but he keeps on going when I wave. Maybe he is nearsighted and can't see me through the driver's bulletproof bubble. Maybe he is out of sampler sheets for his automatic fare-scan and is hurrying to pick up some more. Maybe he just assumes that because I am a woman of a certain age I really don't want to ride in a cab at all.

I walk a block west and take the bus. Busses don't need fare-scan terminals because it always costs the same for every ride and you don't need to key in the tip. Tokens are enough. I ride downtown across the aisle from a woman with two small children, a boy and a girl. The boy is only two or three years old and sits in his mother's lap, making *rrrum-rrrum* noises with his toy truck. The little girl looks about four and regards her brother scornfully. She sits in her own seat with her hands folded in the lap of her peach-colored spring coat. She wants the world to know that she is all grown up and impatient to leave baby things behind. I wonder if she'll like kindergarten as much as Tessa did? She didn't cry at all when it was time to go, even though it meant I couldn't see her in the mornings.

Things are pretty quiet at the Woman's Center. After all, it is a weekday, a workday. You have to work if you want to live. But Oralee is there. Oralee

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is always there, tall and black and ugly as a dog's dinner, the way my mom would say. She is the Center manager. It doesn't pay much, but it's what she wants to do. She is seated at her desk — an old wooden relic from some long-gone public school — and when she sees me she is surprised.

Then she remembers.

"Linda, happy freedom!" She rises from her chair and rushes across the room to embrace me. Her skin is very soft and smells like lilacs. I don't know what to do or say. Oralee lives with her lover Corinne, so I don't feel right about hugging her back, no matter how much I like her or how grateful I am for all she's done for me over the years. It would be easier if she hadn't told me the truth about herself. A lesbian is a lesbian, I have no trouble hugging Corinne, but what Oralee is scares me. She clings to Corinne not because she loves her, but because it's safe, because she'll never have to risk anything that way, because her body craves touching. Oralee is always telling us we have to be brave, but she is a coward, pretending she's something she's not, out of fear. I can understand, but I can't like her for it.

Oralee leads me back to her desk and motions for me to sit down. She leans forward, her elbows on the blotter, a pen twiddling through her fingers. "So, to what do we owe the honor?" she asks, a grin cutting through the scars that make her face look like a topographical map with mountains pinched up and valleys gouged in. Today she wears the blue glass eye that doesn't match her working brown one and that startles people who don't know her.

"My boss gave me the day off," I tell her. "With pay."

"Well, of course he did. Soul-salving bastard."

"I have to be somewhere at three-thirty, but I thought that until then you might have something for me to do here."

Oralee pushes her chair a little away from her desk. The casters squeak and the linoleum floor complains. She runs her fingers over her shaven skull in thought. "Well, Joan and Cruz are already handling all the paperwork.... Our big fund-raising drive's not on until next week, no need for follow-up phone calls, the envelopes are all stuffed and in the mail... "

My heart sinks as she runs down a list of things that don't want doing. I try not to think about the empty hours I'll have to face if Oralee can't use me. To distract myself while I await her verdict, I look at all the things cluttering up her desktop. There is an old soup can covered with yellow-flowered shelving paper, full of paper clips, and another one full of pens and

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pencils. Three clay figurines of the Goddess lie like sunbathers with pendulous breasts and swollen bellies offered up to the shameless sky. Oralee made the biggest one herself, in a ceramics class. She uses Her for a paperweight. Oralee says she is a firm believer in making do with what you've got. Mr. Beeton would laugh out loud if he could see the antiquated terminal she uses. All you need to access it is a password that you type in on the keys so just anyone can get into your files if they discover what it is. At least this way the Woman's Center saves money on sampler pads, even if that's not the real reason.

The photo on the desk is framed with silver, real silver. Oralee has to polish it constantly to keep the tarnish at bay. The young black woman in the picture is smiling, her eyes both her own, her face smooth and silky-looking as the inner skin of a shell, her hair a soft, dark cloud that enhances her smile more beautifully than any silver frame.

At the bottom of the frame, under the glass with the photograph, there is a newspaper clipping. It's just the headline and it's not very big. The event it notes was nothing extraordinary enough to merit more prominent placement on the page: ABORTION CLINIC BOMBED. TWO DEAD, THREE INJURED. The clipping came from a special paper, more like a newsletter for the kind of people who would read TWO DEAD, THREE INJURED and smile. Oralee tells us that most of the papers weren't like that; they used to call them birth control clinics or family planning clinics or even just women's clinics. As if we're none of us old enough to remember when it changed! She talks about those days — the times when the bombings were stepped up and the assaults on women trying to reach the clinics got ugly and the doctors and sometimes their families were being threatened, being killed — as if they'd lasted as long as the Dark Ages instead of just four years. Thank goodness everything's settled down. We're civilized people, after all. We can compromise.

"I know!" Oralee snaps her fingers, making me look up. "You can be a runner. That is — " She hesitates.

"Yes, I can do that," I tell her.

"Are you sure?"

"Just give me what I need and tell me where I have to go. It's all right, really. I need to go to the bank myself anyway."

"Are you *sure*?" she asks again. Why does she doubt me? Do I look so

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fragile? No. I take good care of my body, wash my hair every day, even put on a little lipstick sometimes. It's not like before, that hard time when I first came to the city, when I was such a fool. I almost lost my job, then, because I was letting myself go so badly. I know better, now. It's my duty to set a good example. Children past a certain age start to notice things like how Mommy looks and how Mommy acts. I've read all the books. You get the child you deserve.

Oralee goes into the back room where they keep the refrigerator. She comes back with a compartmentalized cold pack the size of a clutch purse, a factory-fresh sampler pad, and a slip of paper. "You can put this in your pocketbook if you want," she tells me, giving me the cold pack. "Make sure you only keep it open long enough to take out or put in one sample at a time. And for the love of God, don't mix up the samples!"

I smile at how vehement she sounds. "I've done this before, Oralee," I remind her.

"Sure you have; sorry. Here are the names and addresses. Bus tokens are in the clay pot on the table by the front door. You don't have to bring back the pack when you're done; just drop it off next time you're here." She cocks her head. "If you *are* coming back?"

"Of course I am," I say, surprised that she'd think I wouldn't.

"Oh," she says. "Because I thought — you know — after today's over — Well, whatever. Good luck."

There are five names on the list, most of them in the neighborhood close to the Woman's Center, only one of them farther uptown. It's a glorious spring day. Soon it will be Easter. The holiday came late this year, almost the end of April. I think April is a pretty name to give a girl — April, full of hope and promise, full of beauty. Maybe I should have named my daughter April. I laugh away the thought. What's done is done, too late now to change Tessa's name. Too late.

When I get to the first place I'm surprised by how old the woman is who answers the door. I introduce myself and say that the Woman's Center sent me. I show her the cold pack and the sampler pad, telling her what I'll do for her at the bank. She has black hair that is so shot through with silver threads it looks gray, and her fingers are stained with tobacco. She stands in the doorway, stony-eyed, barring me from the dark apartment beyond, making me stand in the hall while I run through my entire explanation.

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After I have finished and I'm standing there, holding out one sampler sheet, she speaks: "I'm not Vicky," she says. "I'm her mother. God will judge you people. You go to hell." And she slams the door in my face.

I feel like a fool, but by the time I reach the next address on the list the feeling has faded. It's better here. The woman's name is Maris and she lives alone. She urges me to come in, to have a cup of tea, some cookies, anything I'd like. Her apartment is small but tasteful, a lot of wicker, a lot of sunlight. "God bless you," she says. "I was just about at my wits' end. I thought if I had to go through that one more time I'd go crazy. It's supposed to get easier with time, but it just gets harder. I've got three more years to go before I'm free. Never again, believe me; never again."

She rubs the sampler sheet over her thumb and watches like a hawk as I fumble it into its thin plastic envelope. The envelope goes into the cold pack and the cold pack goes back into my purse. "Are you sure you remember my password?" she asks as she sees me to the door.

"Yes, but please change it after today," I tell her.

The third and fourth women are not as hospitable as Maris, but there is no one there to tell me to go to hell. One of them is an artist, the other lost her job, and Maris, I recall, told me she'd taken a sick day off from work just on the off chance the Woman's Center could find a runner to come help her. It feels very strange to me, sitting in rooms freckled with spring sunshine, to be talking with strange women when I would normally be at work. In the course of these three visitations I drink three cups of tea and also share a little gin with the woman who has lost her job. My head spins with passwords and special instructions, my hands clasp a pile of three plain brown self-addressed stamped envelopes by the time I teeter out the door in search of my final contact.

I take the bus uptown. Out the window I see news leaves unfurl in blurs of green made more heartstoppingly tender by the gin. It was a mistake to drink, but if I looked into the glass I didn't have to look into the woman's eyes. I decide to get off the bus a few blocks away from my stop. A walk will clear my head.

The blue and red and white lights flash, dazzling me. Two police cars and a crowd have gathered outside a restaurant that's trying to be a Paris sidewalk cafe. A man is clinging to the curlicued iron fence around one of the trees in front of the place, his face a paler green than the leaves above his head. I smell

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vomit, sour and pungent. I watch where I step as I try to make my way through the crowd.

One of the policemen is holding a shopping bag and trying to make the crowd back away. The bottom of the shopping bag looks wet. Another one is telling the people over and over that there is nothing here for them to see, but they know better.

A third stands with pad in hand, interviewing a waiter. The waiter looks young and frightened. He keeps saying, "I didn't know, I had no idea, she came in and ordered a Caesar salad and a cup of tea, then she paid the bill and started to go. I didn't even notice she'd left that bag under the table until that man grabbed it and started to run after her." He points to the man embracing the iron girdle of the tree. "I didn't know a thing."

The girl is in the fourth policeman's custody. I think she must be sixteen, although she could be older and small for her age. Her face is flat, vacant. What does she see? The policeman helps her into the back of his squad car and slams the door. "Said she couldn't face it, going to a clinic, having it recorded like a decent woman. Bitch," I hear him mutter. "Murderer."

As I walk past, quickening my step as much as I can without beginning to run, I hear the waiter's fluting voice say, "I don't think it was dead when she got here."

A man answers the door when I ring the bell at my last stop. "Frances Hughes?" I ask nervously. Has a prankster called the Woman's Center, giving a man's name that sounds like a woman's? Oralee says it's happened before. Sometimes a prank call only leads to a wild goose chase, but sometimes when the runner arrives they're waiting for her. Trudy had her wrist broken and they destroyed all the samples she'd collected so far. It was just like those stories about Japanese soldiers lost for years on small islands in the Pacific, still fighting a war that was over decades ago.

The man smiles at me. "No, I'm her husband," he says. "Won't you come in?"

Frances Hughes is waiting for me in the living room. She is one of those women whose face reflects years of breeding and who looks as if she were born to preside over a fine china tea service on a silver tray. If I drink one more cup of tea I think I'll die, but I accept the cup she passes to me because she needs to do this.

"We can't thank you enough," her husband says as he sits down in the

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Queen Anne armchair across from mine. Frances sits on the sofa, secure behind a castle wall of cups and saucers, sliced lemons and sugar cubes and lacy silver tongs. "I wanted to do it, but Frances insisted we call you."

"You know you couldn't do it, George," says Frances. "Remember how hard it was for you in the clinic, and after?"

"I *could* do it," he insists stubbornly.

"But you don't have to," she tells him softly. "Spare yourself, for me." She reaches over to stroke his hand. There is an old love between them and I feel it flow in waves of strength from her to him.

I leave their building still carrying just three brown envelopes. They don't want me to mail them any cash, like the others; they only want me to close Frances' personal account and transfer the funds into George's.

I also have a check in my wallet from Mr. George Hughes made out to the Woman's Center. He gave it to me when I was leaving the apartment, while I set my purse aside on a miniature bookcase and rebuttoned my jacket. He said, "We were very wrong." I didn't know what he meant. Then, just as I was picking up my purse, my eye lit on the title of one of the volumes in that bookcase.

"No Remorse?"

It is the book that changed things for good, for ill. You can still find it for sale all over. My aunt Lucille gave a copy to my mother. My mother has not spoken to her since. They study it in schools with the same awe they give to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Mein Kampf*. Some say, "It stopped the attacks, the bombings, it saved lives." Others say, "It didn't stop the deaths. So what if they're forced to suffer? It still sanctioned murder." Some reply, "It threw those damned extremists a sop, it truly freed women." And others yet say, "It sold out our true freedom for a false peace, it made us terror's slaves." I say nothing about it at all. All I know is what it did to me.

I looked at Frances' husband and I wanted to believe that the book had come there by accident, left behind by a caller who was now no longer welcome under that roof. But when he looked away from me and his face turned red, I knew the truth. I took the check. "You go to hell," I told him, the same way Vicky's mother said it to me.

I will not use Frances Hughes' password and sample to steal. I could, but I won't. I will not betray as I hope not to be betrayed. But George Hughes doesn't know that. Let him call ahead to his bank, change the password. Let

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him be the one to come down and face the truth of what he's helped to bring about, this dear-won, bloodyminded peace. Let him twist in the wind.

There is almost no line worth mentioning at the bank. It is a small branch office with only one live employee to handle all transactions past a certain level of complexity. All others can be taken care of through the ATMs. There is only one ATM here. As I said, this is a small branch.

I prefer small banks. Larger ones sometimes have live employees on duty whose only job is to make sure that no one uses the ATMs to perform transactions for a third party. That would be cheating.

I stand behind a man who stands behind a woman. She looks as if she is at least fifty years old, but when it is her turn she does not take one of the sampler sheets from the dispenser. Instead she opens her purse and takes out a cold pack like mine, a little smaller. Her hands are shaking as she extracts the sheet, inserts it, and types in the password.

The child is no more than nine months old. It can coo and gurgle. It can paw at the screen with its plump, brown hands. "Hi, sugar," the woman says, her voice trembling. "It's Nana, darlin', hi. It's your nana. Your mama couldn't come here today; she sick. She'll come see you soon, I promise. I love you, baby. I love— "

The screen is dark. A line of shining letters politely requests that the woman go on with her transaction. She stares at the screen, tight-lipped, and goes on. Bills drop one after another into the tray. She scoops them out without even bothering to look down, crams them into her purse, and walks out, seeing nothing but the door.

The man ahead of me dashes a sampler sheet over his thumb, inserts it, and does his business. He looks young, in his twenties. He is handsome. The girls must have a hard time resisting him, especially if he knows how to turn on the charm. He may have the ability to make them think he is falling in love with them, the passion of novels, spontaneous, intense, rapture by accident.

Accidents happen. Accidents can change your life, but only if you let them. While he is waiting for the ATM to process his transaction, he turns his head so that I can see his profile. He looks like a comic book hero, steadfast and noble, loyal and true. If there were an accident, he would accompany her to the clinic. He would hold her hand and stay with her for as long as the doctors allowed. And then it would all be over for him and he could go home, go about his business. No one would insist on making sure he stayed sorry for what was done.

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There is no picture on the screen for him.

I am next. I do the other transactions first. Maris has a little three-year-old boy, like the one I saw on the bus. He can talk quite well for his age. He holds up a blue teddy bear to the screen. "T'ank you, Mommy," he says. "I name him Tadda-boy. Give Mommy a big kiss, Tadda-boy." He presses the bear's snout to the glass.

The artist's little girl is still only a few months old. This is easy. I never had any trouble when Tessa was this young. I could pretend I was watching a commercial for disposable diapers on the t.v. It got harder after Tessa learned to do things, to roll over, to push herself onto hands and knees, to toddle, to talk...

The woman who lost her job has a one-year-old with no hair and the bright, round eyes of the blue teddy bear. I can't tell whether this is a boy or a girl, but I know he or she will be blond. Tessa is blond. She looked like a fuzzy-headed little duckling until she was almost two.

I see why Frances Hughes did not let George handle this. The child lies on its back, staring straight up with dull eyes. It must be more than a year old, judging from its size, but it makes no attempt to move, not even to turn its head. I feel sorry for Frances. Then I remember the book in their house and for a moment I am tempted to believe that there is a just God.

Of course I know better.

It's my turn. I glance over my shoulder. A line has formed behind me. Four people are waiting. They look impatient. One of them is a woman in her sixties. She looks angry. I guess they have been standing in line long enough to notice that I am not just doing business for myself.

I leave the ATM and walk to the back of the line. As I pass the others I murmur how sorry I am for making them wait, how there was no one waiting behind me when I began my transactions. The three people who were merely impatient now smile at me. The woman in her sixties is at the end of the line. She waits until I have taken my place behind her, then she turns around and spits in my face.

"Slut!" she shouts. "Murdering bitch! You and all the rest like you, baby killers, damned whores, can't even face up to your sins! Get the hell out of — "

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave." The bank's sole live employee is standing between us. He is a big man, a tall man. I have yet to see one of these small branches where the only live worker is not built like a bodyguard. That is part of the job too.

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"You should toss her out, not me!" the woman snaps. She lunges for me, swatting at me with her purse. I take a step backwards, holding the envelopes tight to my chest. I am afraid to drop them. She might get her hands on one and tear it up.

The man restrains her. "Ma'am, I don't want to have to call the police."

This works. She settles down. Bristling, she stalks out of the bank, cursing me loudly. The man looks at me but does not smile. "In the future, please limit yourself to personal transactions," he says.

"Thank you," I say, dabbing the woman's spittle from my cheek with a tissue.

It is my turn again. I want to kiss the sampler sheet before I run it across my thumb, but I know that if I do that, I will not be able to access my account. I wonder how long we will have together? Sometimes it is ten seconds, sometimes fifteen. Maybe they will give us twenty because it's Tessa's birthday. I take a deep breath and insert the sampler sheet, then enter my password.

There she is! Oh my God, there she is, my baby, my daughter, my beautiful little girl! She is smiling, twirling to show off her lovely pink party dress with all the crisp ruffles. Her long blonde hair floats over her shoulders like a cloud. "Hi, Mama!" she chirps.

"Hi, baby." My hand reaches out to caress her cheek. I have to hold it back. Touching the screen is not allowed. It either cuts off the allotted seconds entirely, or cuts them short, or extends them for an unpredictable amount of time. Few risk the gamble. I can't; not today.

I take out the invitation and hold it up so that Tessa can see it. "Look, honey," I say. "Pandas!"

"I'm going to school tomorrow," Tessa tells me. "I'm a big girl now. I'm almost all grown up."

"Baby... " My eyes are blinking so fast, so fast! Tessa becomes a sweet pink and gold blur. "Baby, I love you so much. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for what I did, but I was so young, I couldn't — Oh, my baby!"

And I *will* touch her, I *will*! It's all lies they tell us anyway, about how touching the screen will affect how long we may see our children, about how now we are safe to choose, about how our compromise was enough to stop the clinic bombings and the assassinations of doctors and the fear. I don't believe them! I will hold my child!

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Glass, smooth and dark.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

I go with my own business left undone. The man takes a spray bottle of glass cleaner and a cloth from his desk and wipes away the prints of my hands, the image of my lips.

There is another small bank that I like on the east side. I think I'll go there. I start to walk. It's getting late. Paula must be making all kinds of last-minute phone calls, settling the details of my party. They call it freedom. I call it nothing.

At first I hated her, you know. I hated my own child. She was there, always there, on every CRT device I chose to use in college, in public, at home. After the procedure, the college clinic forwarded the developmental information that the central programming unit needed to establish her birthdate. The tissue was sent along, too, so that they could project a genetically accurate image of my child. She wasn't there until her birthdate, but then — !

Then there was no escaping her. Not if I wanted to use a computer, or an ATM, or even turn on any but the most antiquated model of a television set. I hated her. I hated her the way some hate the children of rape who also live behind the glass, after. But they exult in what they've done, how they've had the last laugh, how they've cheated their assailants of the final insult. I have seen them in the banks, at the ATMs, even at work, once. *Who's got the power now?* they shout at the children, and they laugh until they cry. Sometimes they only cry.

I fled her. I ran away — away from college, away from home, away from so much that had been my life before. Away from Tessa. A mandatory sentence of six years of persecution for one mistake, one accident, seemed like an eternity. She was almost the end of my future and my sanity.

And then, one day, it changed. One day I looked at her and she wasn't a punishment; she was my little girl, my Tessa with her long, silky blonde curls and her shining blue eyes and her downy cheeks that must smell like roses, like apples. One day I was tired of hating, tired of running. One day I looked at her and I felt love.

Now they're taking my baby away.

No.

I find a phone booth. "Hello, Ms. Thayer? I'm sorry, something's come up. I can't go with you to the clinic today...Yes, this is Linda...No, really,

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you'll be all right. No one will bother you; it's against the law. And after, you'll handle it just fine...Sure, you will. I did."

"Hello, Mr. Beeton? This is Linda. I don't think I'll be in tomorrow...Yes, I know you can't give me two days off with pay. That's all right."

"Hello, Paula? Linda. Listen, there's a spare key with my neighbor, Mrs. Giancarlo. Feed Squeaker...No, just do it, I can't talk now. And for God's sake, don't let him hide in the closet. I have to go. Good-bye."

I am walking east. I realize that I am still holding the envelopes full of all the money the women need. Singly they are small sums, but put them all together...I could buy a lot of pretty things for Tessa with so much money. I could afford to keep her, if I were rich as Frances Hughes.

There are no mail boxes near the river. I'm letting them all down, all of them except for Frances Hughes and her husband. I'm so sorry. Maybe I should call Oralee — ? No. She's a coward. I despise her. If I turn back to find a mailbox, I might turn back forever. Then I'll be a coward too. It's Tessa who's been so brave, so loving, so alone for so long, and still she smiles for me. Tessa is the only one that matters.

I lean against the railing and see another shore. Gulls keen and dip their wings above the river. Starveling trees claw the sky. The envelopes flutter from my hands, kissing the water. No one is near. I take off my shoes to help me step over the railing. The concrete is cold through my stockings.

There she is. I see her as I have always seen her, smiling up at me through the sleek, shining surface that keeps us apart. She is giggling as she reaches out for the envelopes. Oh, greedy little girl! You can't spend all that. Now that you're six, maybe Mama will give you an allowance, just like the big girls. After all, you're going to school tomorrow. But first, let Mama give you a kiss.

We fly into each other's arms. Oh, Tessa, your lips are so cool! Your laughter rushes against my ears. I breathe in, and you fill my heart.

Happy birthday, my darling.

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Ian Watson's "The Amber Room" provided the inspiration for Stephen Gervais's cover. Peter Crowther and Edward Kramer originally commissioned the story, which will appear this summer in White Wolf's Tombs *anthology.*

Ian's most recent publications are Lucky's Harvest *and* The Fallen Moon, *a two-volume extraterrestrial epic loosely inspired by Finland's national epic, the* Kalevala. *Gollancz has published his eighth story collection,* The Coming of Vertumnus, *and Boxtree has published* Harlequin.

About this tale, he writes, "The story is the story, really. Anecdotally, I've been interested in amber since a Lithuanian publisher, lacking foreign currency, offered to buy a story collection from me for translation in exchange for a bag of amber beads."

The Amber Room

By Ian Watson

AND I SAW HER FALL FROM the sky.

The failed hang-glider had begun to spin like a sycamore seed. Then the sail snapped upward at the keel and became a plunging V. At this point she must have pulled the handle of the parachute. The chute failed to separate from her harness. Orange nylon blossomed but was trapped.

I saw Amber fall. That was my intimate name for Isabelle because of the tan of her skin and the beads of her nipples. I watched her plummet to earth.

Afterward I wept for her just as Phaeton's sisters wept for their brother after he was hurled from the sky because he flew the sun-chariot crazily. But my tears were only salt water. They didn't harden into amber. Not as yet...

I must have been eleven when I first began to dream of flying. In my dreams I soared above the ripe cornfields of the English West Country underneath a wing. The wing was smooth, not feathered. I wasn't a bird.

In the sky of my dreams the sun was a golden ball, a rich warm aromatic sphere, the quintessence of harvest. I believed I had identified the true

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substance of that sun when my grandmother, Gran-Annie, showed me a large bead of amber.

The fields beneath me were imprinted with patterns suggestive of runes or astrological symbols. I honestly can't recall whether "crop circles," so called, had already begun to appear in genuine fields. A memory isn't like a leaf perfectly preserved in amber for all time. We don't remember a past event in itself, but rather our memory of that event. Subsequently we remember the memory of a memory. Thus our mind forever updates itself. Essentially memories are fictions. Each time that we suppose we are remembering, these fictions are being rewritten within ourselves, with ourselves as heroes or victims.

When my dreams began, crop circles were probably already materializing overnight in corn fields. Maybe this had been happening on and off for centuries rather than my dreams being any sort of anticipation of the phenomenon. Later, these circles became a temporary media sensation.

What wild stories there were in the newspapers! The patterns must be enigmatic attempts at communication on the part of some alien intelligence! Or possibly archetypal imagery was being stamped upon patches of plants by some kind of collective planetary mind...

Even to my immature mind I'm sure that speculations of this sort would have seemed nutty. Surely those convolutions in the crops were none other than the wind itself made visible. Eddies and swirls and turbulence. Did not the wind forever comb the hair of the corn, gently or roughly? All the air of the world was akin to the skin of a body, ceaselessly rippling and flexing, sweating or shivering. Air is a vast living organ, though a mindless one.

Surely no one could fall from such a dreamy sky? Surely no one could plunge to earth, and die?

In due course I took up hang-gliding passionately. Presently I was equipped with a degree in engineering, aerodynamics a speciality. Passion became profession. With Max Palmer as partner I founded a fledgling company to design and build new high-performance hang-gliders: craft with wider spans and nose angles, with tighter sails and more battens to camber the roached trailing edges of the airfoil (to be technical for a moment).

Maxburn Airfoils combined Max's first name with my surname, suggesting flying feats at the leading edge of possibility. Max Palmer and Peter Burn: two aces. It was financial backing from Max's family which allowed us to set up, thus his name preceded mine. The company fledged and soared. We even carried out some design consultancy work for NASA, honey upon the bread

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and butter of our regular manufacturing. Usually I wore Gran-Annie's bead as a pendant around my neck instead of a tie.

Surely no one could fall.

Until I fell in love — or in lust — with Max's Isabelle. Until Isabelle — until Amber — fell.

A hang-glider pilot aims to see the invisible. He or she watches wind. At first, to do so, he throws dry grasses. He kicks dust. He eyes the flutter of a ribbon, the ripple of tree-tops, the progress of smoke and clouds. Eventually, for a few of us, an extra perception is born.

As a boy a premonition of this perception showed me the words of wind written upon the fields. In the ghastly wake of Isabelle's death impassioned perception took me to Kaliningrad on the Baltic coast in search of the lost room of amber — the lost room of Amber herself. I'd begun to dream of finding that room, and my lost love within it.

An entire room wrought of amber!

Gran-Annie first told me the tale. The central luminary of my dreams was a sphere of smoldering amber, so naturally I was enthralled. I concocted various boyish adventure fantasies about finding the room. But it was only after Isabelle died that I began to dream repeatedly of doing so in an airborne context. The room had bizarrely replaced the crop circles. Mountains replaced fields as a setting.

My German grandmother had been dead for five years, but I soon reacquainted myself with all the details of the story.

The creation of the amber room began in the year 1702 in Denmark. Disagreements and delays occurred, but by 1713 the amber room was on display in Berlin, either gloriously or partially, when Peter the Great visited Frederick. The ebullient Tsar was so enchanted that Frederick could do no other than make a gift of the whole caboodle to Peter.

Off to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg went sleigh-loads of crates containing wall panels, pediments, turned corners, embellishments, rosettes, et al.

In 1755 Empress Elizabeth had the room transferred to the Summer Palace at Tsarskoe Selo. Finishing touches were still occurring as late as 1763 — culminating in one of the wonders of the world. Visitors expressed their sense of stepping inside of a dream or fantasy.

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Although constructed by human hands, surely that room did indeed partake of *otherness*. Such golden luminosity! Such mosaic contrasts of yellows and honey-browns and caramel and clear red. Such a wealth of carvings: of Roman landscapes allegorizing the human senses, and of flowers and garlands and of tiny figures (as if seen from high in the air) and of trees. Such mirrors, such chandeliers dripping amber lustres. Amazing, the parquet floor. Ravishing, the allegorical ceiling.

In 1941, eight years after Gran-Annie's parents fled with her from Germany, Nazi armies were about to lay siege to Leningrad. Art treasures were being evacuated to vaults in the Urals — but the Germans overran the Summer Palace. They dismantled the amber room and shipped it to Königsberg Castle. There, it was reassembled under the eye of the director of the Prussian Fine Arts Museum, a certain Dr. Alfred Rohde. (It was from seven hundred kilometers further west, from Hannover, that Gran-Annie's parents had emigrated to England.)

Within a couple of years loot filled Königsberg Castle to bursting point. But British bombs were raining down. Dismantled once more, the room departed — and so likewise did Rohde. Königsberg was wrecked; Königsberg was overrun, soon to become Kaliningrad — politically a district of Russia but separated by the three Baltic republics.

Weirdly, Dr. Rohde returned to his post. He co-operated freely with the Soviet occupation forces. Yet he disclaimed any knowledge of the whereabouts of the wonder of the world. Soon after Dr. Rohde's return, he and his wife both died suddenly. According to their death certificates the cause was dysentery. These documents were signed by a Dr. Paul Erdman — but when the KGB investigated they could find no trace of any such doctor.

Supposedly the dismantled amber room came to rest on the bottom of the Baltic Sea some twenty nautical miles off the German coast in a ship which a Soviet submarine had torpedoed.

There is such a thing as disinformation...

The Nazis had a fetish about mountains as last redoubts — about Eagle's Nests, and high eyries. Wouldn't the perfect place to hide the amber room be a mountain range where aircraft could not easily maneuver and which advancing tanks would avoid? My dreams imposed upon me the conviction that this was so, and that the hiding place could only be found from the air, bird-like, Godlike, in solitary flight. When I contemplated finding that missing room I was a boy again, enraptured.

Thus might Amber's death be exorcised.

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Naturally I didn't talk to Max about this method of coping with tragedy. He had his own means of handling grief. Max immersed himself in design work — especially as regards the catastrophic failure of the airfoil which had plunged Isabelle to her death. I was fairly sure that he would search in vain for the cause. His feel for gliders — at the edge of possibility — was less than mine. I'd always been able to reach that little way beyond him. Now I would reach a long way, from England to former East Prussia.

I simply had to visit the last known location of the amber room. Surely I would meet some aficionado of amber who knew more than I could find out in England. Close to Kaliningrad was the seaside town of Yantarny — literally, *Amberville*. That's the source of ninety percent of the world's present-day supplies of amber. If you rub amber, it develops a static electric charge. Kaliningrad was drawing me like a magnet.

I told Max that I was going to Germany to revisit my grandmother's roots and to investigate the possibility of exporting hang-gliders. I wouldn't try to fool Max that I was hoping to sell our products in those lake-strewn boggy *Baltic* flatlands where the economies are bumping awkwardly along! Thanks to Gran-Annie I was fluent in German. If English wasn't understood much in Kaliningrad, German should be a reasonable bet. After the Second World War it's true that most of the German population of the Kaliningrad region was either dead or expelled or sent to Siberia, but since the demise of the Soviet Union, Kaliningrad had became a free port to attract prosperity, and the closest source of prosperity was Germany.

With a sail secured on top of the Range Rover, I drove through Germany, then Poland. In Warsaw I was obliged to garage my transport. Whatever its free port status, the Kaliningrad region was militarily sensitive due to being the most westerly redoubt of the rump of Russia. The Polish border wasn't open to ordinary civilian road traffic — and I hardly intended to emulate Matthias Russ, or whatever his name was, by hang-gliding my way into the area.

Ach: those Baltic flatlands! The nearest mountains were the Carpathians. A tidy way to the south, those sprawl across a thousand kilometers from Poland to Slovakia into Romania. The amber room had to be somewhere in the Carpathians. But without some clue even a person of special perception could spend ten years searching that range from the air.

I allowed myself two weeks. Continued absence would amount to a betrayal of Max, and of Maxburn Airfoils too.

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* * *

I had seen Amber fall from the sky.

I flew to Kaliningrad on a newly inaugurated direct flight from Warsaw, and on the way through Immigration an encounter occurred which was to prove crucial.

Manning the desk were a fresh-faced young officer and a sallow older colleague whose high cheekbones and absence of folds to the eyelids proclaimed Mongol blood in his ancestry...

Now, I'd opted for a tourist visa, which meant that I'd been obliged to arrange accommodation expensively in advance. Intourist in London had tried to book me into a so-called "floating palace" on the river in the center of the city. A couple of cruise ships were permanently moored in lieu of modern luxury hotels. The month of May was an excellent time to stay in one of those, supposedly.

I didn't wish to be cooped up where my comings and goings could be monitored. And what was this business about the month of May? Further questioning of the Intourist lady, who had actually visited Kaliningrad, disclosed that in May the weather wouldn't be scorching, consequently I could keep the porthole of my cabin shut. The river, it seemed, stank somewhat. I opted instead for a hotel on terra firma several kilometers from the city center. The Baltika was very popular with tour companies, I was assured.

The younger immigration officer wished to see how much money I had with me. This seemed an American sort of question in this city where all hard currencies were legal tender nowadays. Despite having prepaid for my hotel, Did I have enough to support myself during my stay? I did have enough, and more. Much more.

He eyed my amber pendant. "Are you here to buy jewelry?" he demanded. "Your passport says you are an engineer."

We were speaking German. The older man interrupted to point out that I seemed very fluent in German, whereas my passport was a British one.

"My *Grossmutter* came from Germany," I told him.

"From so-called Northern East Prussia, Herr Burn?" Did I detect a note of nationalist displeasure? "Nördliche Ostpreussen" was how Germans still referred to the Kaliningrad Oblast.

"No, she came from Hannover. She fled from the Nazis in '34. She hated Nazis."

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The man smiled, then.

"Is an engineer here to buy jewelry?" persisted the junior officer. Why the quiz? Amber is hardly gold or rubies. Who would wish to smuggle it? As I understood, the bottom had virtually fallen out of the Western market for amber. With the disintegration of the superpower, any wannabe Russian rock group would bring out a haversack full of the stuff to pay their way. Maybe my fellow passengers — principally Poles — weren't as interesting as myself to interrogate. Or maybe obstructiveness lingered.

"I'm fascinated by the history of the amber room," I said — a harmless enough admission, not to mention being the truth.

The young man looked blank. "The amber room?" I suppose you might meet a native of London who hasn't the foggiest idea where the Crown Jewels are housed. The other officer spoke rapidly in Russian, enlightening his colleague.

To recover from chagrin, the young officer enquired what sort of engineer I was, and when I specified hang-gliders the older man reached for my passport and my hotel confirmation with such an impetuous hand that he actually knocked the documents off the desk. I would have picked these up myself but he stepped swiftly out to do so. As he rose, his lapel bulged and I noticed a badge pinned on the inside where it wouldn't normally be seen. A disc, the size of a small coin, bore a double-headed eagle. The old imperial eagle, emblem of the Tsars... He must be a nationalist — of a far-out eccentric royalist stripe. All sorts of strange creatures had crawled out of the woodwork when the Soviet Union fell apart.

I was irritated by the delay. But also I felt suddenly *possessed*, in that moment, by my dream perception — galvanized and beguiled. The words jerked out of me almost inadvertently:

"Maybe," I burbled, "a hang-gilder pilot can find the lost amber room, wherever it is!" Then I laughed dismissively.

In fact, the young officer had had my best interests at heart. If I was going to be carrying a lot of money round, it might be sensible to hire a driver, an interpreter, an escort, if I followed his drift. A reliable and discreet man from a private security company. Kaliningrad wasn't awash with crime to the extent, alas, of Moscow or St. Petersburg. Yet even so! A word to the wise. He produced a little printed card with address and phone number and printed a name on the back.

"My name. Tell them that I recommended you — "

No doubt for a percentage of the fee which I would be paying...

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The older man didn't want me to take the card. He became quite vociferous, in Russian. Maybe he viewed this as an insult to his nation. I think he would have confiscated the card if this had been within his power.

THUS IT WAS that I acquired Pavel as a minder and guide for my stay in Kaliningrad.

The fellow bore quite a resemblance to me — though this is purely coincidental. Both of us were only of medium height, though big-boned. We were both endowed with freckles and curly gingery hair and light blue eyes. Somewhere in Pavel's ancestry there must have been a Viking or two. He could have served as a double if he had exchanged his cheap leather jacket for my more fashionable anorak, and had donned the amber pendant. He carried a registered firearm, and was discretion itself as regards my business. Maybe his employers supplied a pamphlet on "How to be a Minder." Rule one: maintain a bland facade. Of course, to begin with it would have seemed that he was merely minding a tourist with a particular interest in amber.

Next day, he collected me from the Baltika in a dark green Mercedes with lots of kilometers on the clock. Its bodywork might be green but its exhaust emissions no longer were. Actually, the local petrol was at fault. The streets of this dreary city which had risen upon the ruins of grand old Königsberg were full of fumes. The river was indeed as black and murky as old engine oil. Bleak wastelands punctuated some remarkably ugly Soviet architecture. The old Cathedral was a shell, though some scaffolding hinted at possible restoration. The castle, where Dr. Rohde had stored the room, had *been* a shell — till it was demolished by dynamite to make way for a House of Soviets which, Pavel remarked, was too ugly for anyone ever to have the gall to complete.

Pavel pointed out a certain pink building beside the North Station, which had been KGB headquarters. That's where he had worked until he had privatized himself. I suppose this admission exonerated him of being any sort of informer nowadays.

We visited the Amber Museum, which was located in a burly red brick tower. That tower was one of the survivors of war, as were a number of city gates and bastions. Personally I found the museum mediocre, showcasing too much modern jewelry. Through Pavel I quizzed the dumpy lady director, who spoke no German, about the amber room.

She believed the submarine story.

I asked her about Rohde's death. On this topic she had no opinions.

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I told her that I was researching a thriller which I had long yearned to write on account of my German grandmother. This cover story had occurred to me in view of my experience at the airport. I would announce my ambition blatantly — but in the guise of fiction. I aimed to write a story about a hang-glider pilot who hunts for, and finds, the lost amber room in a mountainous Nazi hiding place. I assured the lady director that I was interested in any hypothesis, however fantastic.

However, fantasy wasn't her forte. "Herr Burn," she lectured me (via Pavel), "have you not noticed the blinds at all the windows? Have you not seen how thick the glass display cases are? Sunlight degrades amber over a relatively modest time. Amber is chemically a bitumen. Air oxidizes it till it is so brittle that it can distintegrate into a pile of dust. You speak of the amber room being kept in the open somewhere, fully assembled, exposed to wind and sunlight? What stupidity."

Absolutely the room must be out in the open, three-dimensionally, beneath the sky, not packed flat in cases in some cavern! The parquet floor, the great wall panels, the allegorical ceiling dangling its chandeliers: all must be erected and connected, and suffusing and refracting golden light. How else could it conform to my dream? How else could Amber herself be waiting in the room?

"Sheer stupidity."

My interview was at an end.

I went with Pavel to a shop specializing in amber jewelry on Leninsky prospekt, and then to another on prospekt Mira. Despite our proximity to Yantarny — to *Amberville-by-the-sea* — there was a dearth of decent merchandise on display. The proprietor of the first shop became brusque when he grasped that I wasn't interested in buying anything but only in wasting his time with fanciful questions. The manager of the second was eager that I should include the exact address of his premises in my prospective best-seller — which in *his* opinion ought to be about an attempt to refloat the torpedoed ship, in the style of *Raise the Titanic*, and featuring neo-Nazi conspirators. He urged me to visit the Bunker Museum near the university. That bunker was the command post of Hitler's Reich till the Red Army overran the devastated city. Part of it had been left completely untouched since the day the surrender was signed in it. Such ghosts, Herr Burn, such echoes of the past. Perfect atmosphere for a best-seller.

I wouldn't visit the damned bunker. But Yantarny, yes — I would go there on the very next day. At the source of amber I might find some better pointer.

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Back in the car again, in our cocoon amidst the pollution, Pavel explained that visits to Yantarny were a slightly sensitive matter.

"You see, foreigners can only buy a train ticket to Yantarny if they have a special document..."

My heart sank. "Is it a military zone?"

No, it wasn't. Just along the coast at Baltiysk, was a huge naval base. Baltiysk was a restricted area — though nowadays sightseeing visits could even be arranged. For commercial reasons Yantarny was somewhat out of bounds to independent travelers.

"*Somewhat* out of bounds," stressed Pavel. "I could drive you there, but it might be wiser to join a group tour."

He would arrange this. He would accompany me. Even so, at Yantarny I wouldn't be able to visit the workings or the beach. Those were fully out of bounds. I would only be able to gawp at pipelines through which the quarried earth and amber were pumped across the town to be separated, and the amber cleaned.

Damnation. Still, did I really need to inspect those workings, like some commercial spy?

I never did get to Yantarny. Back at the Baltika, to my surprise, a message was waiting for me — to telephone a certain number.

Did the proprietor of the amber shop have some new suggestion for my best-seller about sunken treasure? Or, after a change of heart, was it the lady director of the museum who wanted to speak to me?

Not in the least. It proved to be the older immigration officer, who had noted where I was staying. Would I meet him and some friends for a meal and drinks at a restaurant on Leninsky to discuss a matter of mutual interest? But of course. And by the way, had I taken his young colleague's advice regarding a chaperon? Why yes, I had. In that case my minder must remain in the car. This matter was confidential.

The restaurant was very noisy due to the constant loud dance music. This entertainment rendered eavesdropping virtually impossible. It wasn't merely face to face but almost nose to nose that I met Rylov the immigration officer, and Antonov, and a nameless gentleman, over German beer and fried chicken.

Antonov was of the hefty breed. Fifty-eight inch chest and fifty inch waist, with a puce suit to match, crumpled though of decent tailoring. Mongol genes — and tissue courtesy of carbohydrate. He had to be a member

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of the Kaliningrad mafia. At first I thought that he was here as muscle, a bodyguard for the man with no name. In fact Antonov spoke English well, and was as much a part of this as Rylov or the Enigma. Mr. Mystery was in his seventies: dapper, with close-cropped silvery hair, and of refined features. The heavy tinted thick-lensed glasses he wore might have been due to weak eyes but they gave him the appearance of an aristocratic interrogator — though he left the interrogating to Antonov. He gave the appearance of understanding German and English but only spoke, from time to time, in Russian. During our encounter he smoked a dozen of those fragrant cigarettes consisting principally of a cardboard tube.

"So you believe that the pilot of a hang-glider can find the lost room?" Antonov said to me.

"Somewhere in the Carpathians," I replied. Mr. Mystery sucked his cigarette then rapped out something in Russian.

The story which I'd adopted bubbled forth. I was researching a thriller.

Antonov eyed me. "And the room shall appear nakedly out in the open? Without any framework or corset to support it?"

My dream inundated me. "It must. It has to. How else can the flier find it?"

"Ah," said Antonov. "And you are the flier."

"I do fly, that's true."

His next remark amazed me. "Maybe it needs a special perception to find the room."

I must have gaped at him.

Rylov said in halting English, "You not truly write novel. To write novel is a lie. You want to find the room." The dance music bawled around me, isolating us in a mad oasis. "*Why* you want to find room, Herr Burn? Because of treasure value?"

"*No*!"

Because Amber fell from the sky. Because she beckoned me from within the golden room. I fingered my talisman.

"It's a personal matter," I said. "An emotional matter." I hesitated before confessing: "I dream. I dream of finding it."

"By magic," said Antonov. I thought he was mocking me. Yet the next minute he began to discourse about the Third Reich and about psychics. For a while I imagined that he might be proposing a new plot for my phantom novel. Now that communism and state atheism had collapsed, was not occultism all the vogue in Russia?

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Accompanied by nods from Mr. Mystery, Antonov explained, "The Nazis persecuted most occultists, Mr. Burn, yet some they pampered...."

Seemingly the German navy had financed a major scientific expedition to the Baltic in the hope of determining by radar the concave curvature of the Hollow Earth. The inglorious failure of this demented project did not deter the Naval Research Institute in Berlin from lavishing the finest wines and cigars upon psychics while those visionaries swung pendulums over charts of the Atlantic — this, in response to mounting losses of U-boats. And who knew what had been the upshot of the Nazi-sponsored psychic expedition to Tibet?

The point of all this was that Antonov and his associates had evidence of a rite being performed within the amber room in Königsberg Castle under the eye of Dr. Alfred Rohde and a high-ranking Nazi — with the aim of concealing the future whereabouts of the room. The otherworldly treasure would be hidden amidst mountains, of course — I was right on that account — but also in some veiled domain adjacent to the mundane world...till someone of vision could rediscover it with suitable aid.

"The name of the doctor who poisoned Rohde and his wife was Erdmann, Mr. Burn. The name means *Earthman*, by contrast with the occult world of spirit." Antonov leered at me, sweating. "And also by contrast with the sky?"

"Why," I asked, "did the Germans take such pains to hide the room?"

"*Why*?" Antonov's tone proclaimed that the answer should be self-evident. Mr. Mystery was fingering the lapel of his own suit. I caught a flash of, yes, a double-headed eagle on a pin. This served as a signal to Antonov to initiate me.

"Because," said the bulky fellow, "the amber room was once the glory of the Tsar's Summer Palace, a symbol of Holy Russia, usurped by the Bolshevists. Nazis felt hatred for all Russians. The imperial Russian government fought the fathers of those Nazis in the First World War..." He didn't need to lower his voice due to the din of the music. "Mr. Burn, the rediscovery of the amber room heralds...the restoration of the Tsars. It will serve as a sure sign."

Rylov nodded. Mr. Mystery exhaled blue smoke. In the logic of loony nationalism perhaps this was true.

"You can help us, Mr. Burn. We will help you fulfill your own private dream! We know where to look, and we have the means to help you see. What we ask is that you buy the means from us, simply to help our funds." He named a figure in Deutschmarks which corresponded with what Rylov already knew I had in my possession.

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A scam. This had to be a scam. A confidence trick.

If I tried to walk out on them, would I be detained by a gun held covertly under the table? Would I be robbed while Pavel sat patiently in the car outside? Worse, might the music mask an actual pistol shot?

Ah but this trio couldn't be sure that the money was on me at the moment...

"Show me this *means* of yours," I demanded.

Antonov frowned. "We do not carry it around restaurants. I will come to your hotel tomorrow afternoon. We exchange...with good will."

AS PAVEL DROVE ME along Moskovsky back toward the Baltika he admitted, "I took a look inside the restaurant, Mr. Burn. I recognized the big man with you. He is a criminal."

I suppose his curiosity was justifiable in view of my mysteriously meeting with strangers within a day of my arrival in Kaliningrad. Did Pavel imagine that I was a criminal too? Or that I was involved in the espionage game? That my interest in amber was merely a front?

"It's all right," I assured him. "Antonov offered to sell me some information about the amber room I've been asking about."

"Antonov is his real name, or at least it's the name he uses."

Ah. Wise Pavel.

"Did you recognize the old man with the glasses?"

My minder shook his head.

"Pavel, tomorrow afternoon Antonov is coming to the hotel to bring me the information. I'm suspicious this might be a *Bauernfängerie*." A "yokel-trap": how picturesque the German word for confidence trick. "I want you to be with me when he visits. There'll be some extra drink-money for you."

We had crossed the ring-road by now, and in the darkness the ten floors of the Baltika loomed on our left.

My room was on the sixth floor. We'd been waiting most of the afternoon. I was eyeing some wasteland through the smog-haze when a white Mercedes came into view, steering erratically at speed. The car barely missed a taxi and a bus before skidding to a halt, narrowly avoiding some German tourists.

A stout figure, unmistakably Antonov, lurched from the car. Clutching his side, he lumbered toward the entrance. Was he injured?

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Pavel and I were waiting by the elevator when Antonov spilled out. Luckily the corridor was deserted but for us. We had to heave Antonov along to my room, and into a dingy over-stuffed armchair. He'd been *shot*. It seemed that this ox of a man was dying, though he wasn't bleeding much at all. Not externally, at least. He'd be bleeding inwardly.

I'd seen Amber bleed inwardly to death, her outward form still fairly unblemished...

Antonov's breath was ragged. "Seeing double," he mumbled in English as he eyed me and Pavel. Pavel said something in Russian, and recognition dawned. "Bodyguard...Rylov said..."

"This is Pavel. Don't worry. He doesn't understand English."

"You met your twin, Mr. Burn...*There are affinities*...Pavel is Paul, and you are Peter. Both saints attend me." Mysticism was welling up in him along with his lifeblood.

What kind of confidence trick was this, if someone had shot Antonov to try to prevent him from coming to me?

"What happened?" I begged.

Blood bubbled on his lips, consecrating his words.

"Arguing...He who had the *means* in his care...Hating foreigners... Even if a foreigner does have the vision..." He coughed. "Wasting time...Look in the heart of the High Tatras, Mr. Burn."

The High Tatras of Slovakia...

He whispered the name of a town, which I hastened to scribble on a pad. Antonov struggled to reach an inside pocket of his suit, and slid out a spectacle case made of steel. "Look with these..."

I opened the case. The spectacles were so old. The frames, sides, and earrests were of thin tarnished metal. Surely the lenses were of amber, though the amber was so clear and transparent. Apart from their evident age the spectacles looked remarkably like John Lennon glasses.

These were the means to find the amber room?

"Man of the Königsberg Guild made these, Mr. Burn...Christian Porschin...Sixteen-nineties...By heating amber gently in..." The English word failed him so he resorted to German. "In *Leinöl*. Blue flower," he mumbled by way of explanation, though I was well aware what *Leinöl* meant, namely linseed. Heat amber in linseed to clarify it — then grind lenses.

"Later on, Mr. Burn, the Nazi magic ceremony, remember..."

A ceremony to enchant the spectacles? To attune them to the amber room! When someone of vision wore these, he would be able to locate the lost room...

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Maybe there had been something magical about these glasses even back in the late Seventeenth Century. Science and magic were still uneasy bedfellows back then. These spectacles had been safeguarded somewhere in the Kaliningrad region throughout the Soviet annexation, in this hard steel case — but not on behalf of covert Nazis. There couldn't have been any Nazis lurking in the vicinity. Nearly all Germans had been killed or deported or sent to Siberia, right? Covert Russian royalists had become the custodians.

It was my luck — no, my destiny — that Rylov was a recruit to this crazy nationalist minority cause and that my quest seemed a godsend to the dotty Tsarists.

Though not to all of them! Many of the newly liberated political animals must be deeply xenophobic. Holy Russia, sacred motherland: safeguard and restore her strength. Let not the West pollute the national soul. There'd been a violent quarrel in the royalist faction. Certain members would have preferred a Rasputin to receive the specs, not a mere visitor from abroad.

Absolutely, this was no yokel-trap, not when it led to murder. Nor could I disbelieve in the spectacles. Too much faith, and death, had been invested in them.

"Blue flowers," repeated Antonov, as if I might find the room in some high meadow full of blooms the hue of the sky itself. This was such an inconsequential detail, communicated with such urgency as thought began to dissipate from the brain. Almost like babbling of green fields.

Finally he slurred something in Russian, and I heard Pavel suck in his breath. Unsurprising that Antonov should revert to his mother tongue in the final moments — as any of us grown-ups might cry out, terminally, to the mother who bore us. Had those last words been a prayer?

He was dead. Those high fatty cheeks slumped a little. Those eyes without any folds to the lids were blank.

I'd imagined that the fall from the sky would kill Isabelle outright, mercifully and abruptly. She should have remained unconscious throughout her dying minutes. Surely she did not once open her eyes and focus upon me!

Pavel was regarding the spectacles in perplexity. The only word of the conversation between myself and Antonov which he could have understood would have been *Leinöl*. Linseed, and a pair of antique glasses. Why should I be willing to spend so much upon old specs? How could those be the motive for a killing?

"Help me get him out of here!" I took out my wallet, and removed a couple of hundred mark bills which I thrust at Pavel. "He won't be needing

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money now. Here's an installment on a tip for you." *Ein weniges Trinkgeld.* Oh quite a lot. "There'll be more to come, at the airport."

After a quick recce, we heaved the body along to a tiny service room. Vacuum cleaner, linen, bars of soap. While I lurked, Pavel summoned the nearby elevator. The corridor remained deserted. The elevator arrived empty. While Pavel delayed the elevator, I dragged the body inside, then I hopped out — as did he, after pressing for the top floor.

"Wir haben Glück, Herr Burn..."

Yes, we'd been lucky, though we still needed to erase scuff marks from the carpet then wash some spots in my room and rub dirt in to restore their former appearance. Oh, and we reversed the cushions of the armchair. Antonov hadn't bled much at all. Not externally.

The corpse would soon be found. There'd be a bit of a fracas. But in these progressive days no KGB security men routinely haunted the lobby. And Antonov had known my room number in advance.

"By the way," I asked casually, "what did he say in Russian at the very last?"

Pavel grimaced. "It was stupid. Long live the Tsar, he said."

I was hard put to conceal my elation at this final confirmation of Anton's integrity, nevertheless I agreed that Antonov's last words were completely *Dummkopf.* If Pavel still decided that I was a courier between royalists in Russia and in the West, why, he had more drink-money to look forward to, in return for his discretion!

Oh, I'd seen my love fall from the sky. And now I could find her again.

Where hang-gliders are concerned, there's always a thin line between stability and instability; and so it was with Amber too.

A cutting-edge craft which verges on being unstable is going to react wildly when you try some virtuoso maneuver — though equally, a craft which is too stable is an exhausting drag to fly. A bit of instability has its merits. Amber had many merits. She was gorgeous, passionate, adventuresome.

Yet danger excited her rather too much. She courted the frisson. *Not* that she was a dangerous flier. She was too skilled to be dangerous. Skill vetoes silliness. Steering toward a thundercloud wasn't her idea of a good time, but in her regular life she did risk thunder and lightning.

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A cuckolded husband is often the last to know that he's being cheated and betrayed; and I was the last of a handful of accomplices in betrayal — the awkward thumb, as it were, since I was the closest to home. The awkward eager thumb.

Isabelle knew how to conduct a liaison, so she protested to me during the early weeks of our own affair. Did Max suspect anything at all about Simon Lee, her previous conquest? Or about Jim Parrish, Lee's predecessor?

Until then, nor had I suspected about Lee or Parrish. Lee was a locally-based rally driver and dealer in sports cars. Parrish, it transpired, was a mushroom farmer and membership secretary of some federation of pot-holers.

Did knowledge of my own predecessors tarnish the craving I felt for her? I suppose I was jealous and at the same time thrillingly flattered to be preferred to other men.

Cuckoldry is such an old-fashioned word for what I was doing to Max, but in view of our close relationship I found the term appropriate. Hitherto Isabelle had cheated — but her lovers weren't as close to Max as I was. Max, whose family's money was our foundation.

Admittedly I had desired Isabelle previously. Yet I wouldn't have dreamed of *doing* anything. You might describe me as inhibited — notwithstanding my soaring dreams! I hadn't become intimate with a woman either at university or subsequently. At a party I might tipsily and jokingly embrace some fellow I knew well — or an older woman acquaintance for whom I felt no frenzy — rather than the girl close by for whom I actually lusted. Displacement, that's the name for it.

When my self-control finally slipped — was stripped away — by Isabelle, I did indeed succumb to erotic frenzy with her to an extent which surprised her, and delighted her. This delight risked being our undoing and the ruin of Maxburn Airfoils. She began to muse about leaving humdrum Max for me. The frisson of flying had hitched her and Max together in the first place (and I assume his future inheritance played a part), but he wasn't fully able to satisfy her, so it seemed. Nor was motherhood an imminent goal. Bloated with child, how might she fly at the edge of possibility?

Pretense in public, frenzy in private!

I remember us relaxing after love-making in the privacy of my cottage which I'd renamed The Wings. The place was secluded. Woodland, on most sides. A shady lane gave quiet access. The Wings consisted of a south wing and a west wing, with a sheltered high-hedged wild garden to the rear.

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Amber's golden sun-lamp tan left no pale loin-stripe. Blonde bloom upon her skin, as on a firm sweet fruit. Those amber areolas and the succulent beads of her nipples. Freckles on her upper arms and shoulders. Her slim nose, her restless blue eyes framed with challenging violet shadow. She wore her flaxen hair in a long braided rope, baring her brow, offering me a kind of tail to hold.

I was, in our pillow talk, The Thumb. The Thumb would jut stiffly, throbbing to hitch a ride.

"Thumb's up," she would say. "Thumb's up." This was to be her joke — risqué and risky — whenever we were setting out to fly, me and her and Max each with our separate sails.

On this occasion I remember her speculating whether two people could possibly make love aloft, high in the sky, veiled by a cloud, whilst flying tandem side by side together. Would the hang-straps make this totally impossible — unless at least one person unhooked? How wildly would bodily movements pitch the craft? She laughed, she laughed.

"I's like to go on holiday to Zanzibar," she said. "Nobody else seems to go there. Max isn't interested."

"Well, the two of us can hardly slip away to Zanzibar together."

"I suppose not. I just want to go somewhere where I'm invisible."

"I think you'd be very visible in Zanzibar."

"Somewhere which is my own secret place. And yours."

"We're in it at this moment, aren't we?"

"Jim made love to me in a cave."

I didn't wish to hear about my predecessors.

ISABELLE WAS NOMINALLY a silversmith. She had trained thus, indulged by her parents. Courtesy of Max she had a little workshop kitted out with drills and cutters and melting pot, blast burner and drawbench, hammers, burnishers and buffers. She did make some elaborate earrings. She had created perfect little hang-gliders to dangle down from one's lobes, sails brushing the wearer's neck like silver insects. She had made life-size slim silver ears to hang underneath one's flesh-and-blood ears. Was this wit or sheer caprice? Expensive toys gave her a pretext to hang out at swanky craft fairs and be admired, and meet such as Simon and Jim.

She began to nag at going away with me.

Going *away*? Away from my life?

* * *

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Another time, at The Wings, I told her about the amber room — and immediately there was a place in which we ought to make love. To surprise her, on the next sunny afternoon I pinned golden cellophane over the bedroom window. Was my light-fitting an adequate substitute for a chandelier? Could the carpet become a parquet floor of red and gold and caramel? The only amber was round my neck. And beside me, in bed! Amber's skin hardly needed any tinting by cellophane, though I myself became golden for a couple of hours.

Yes, we trod such a thin line between stability and instability. If Max discovered, what a wreckage of my once-stable life there would be. Did this possibility stimulate Isabelle? Whilst in The Wings, my own self-control evaporated. If the collapse of control were to spread further, involving Maxburn Airfoils in disorder, what then?

Amber said to me, "Of course, if Max had a flying accident I'd feel so wretched and so sad. Worse, you and I could hardly continue loving. If we did, the finger of suspicion would point. Yet how could we stop loving? That's why I'm sure we should go away. Why not to America — where they surf the sky?"

Financially this seemed deeply impractical. Was I to set up shop all over again? Was I to work with designers who might have a veto over me? Isabelle would be deserting her check book in the process of deserting Max. Was I to provide her with a new silver smithy?

Horns of a dilemma! Perils of cuckoldry. Terror tiptoed along my spine. Thumbs down.

I had no particular trouble leaving Kaliningrad. The murder had obviously been due to a gangland feud. In spite of the manifest lack of pursuit, the victim must have been trying to hide himself in the hotel — rather than having any special business at the Baltika. The Baltika was certainly not paying any protection money to racketeers. Nyet, nein, absolutely not.

Nor did any xenophobic tsarists try to hinder me on the way from boarding the Warsaw-bound plane.

Nor was my hang-glider stolen by Polish spivs on the road south by way of Kraków.

Guards on the Slovak side of the border with Poland were mainly on the lookout for cheap Polish cigarettes and for migrant Romanians — particularly for gypsy Romanians trying to reach the Shangri-La of Germany. Myself and Range Rover and hang-glider passed muster; thus I entered the heart of the High Tatra mountains. I was soon at a certain pleasant resort town crowded with tourists.

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Tourists, tourists! Now that snow was thawing on all southerly slopes the skiing season was over — yet the swelter and thunderstorms of high summer were still a couple of months away. Apart from a lingering chill, this was a fine time to admire towering white peaks and ramble and climb a bit and sup strong Tatra beer. Many Germans were doing so.

Up aloft, the air would be bitter. Even in summer the higher slopes only warmed to a few degrees above zero. Visibility shouldn't be a bother. During full summer the sky would cloud over almost every morning, prelude to thunder and lightning by midday, with clear sky only from late afternoon onwards. But not as yet.

I had to visit the nearest flying ground of the Slovak Aeroclub to present my credentials. The amber room might be invisible, but I wouldn't be. I had to demonstrate my sail and my skills, finesse a permit, sign a waiver, take out an expensive insurance bond in case the Mountain Rescue Service needed to be called out. I promised not to drift over the backs of mountains, to flee at the sight of any thundercloud forming, to conduct myself sensibly.

In the hotel where I stayed, vegetables seemed almost entirely absent from meals. Duck with bread dumplings; pork with bacon dumplings. Had these people never heard of a pea or a carrot? Ah, explained a waiter, former Communist mismanagement of agriculture was to blame. I imagined innumerable fields devoted to a monoculture of dumpling bushes.

Isabelle would have liked it here. My Amber was a flesh-eater.

She certainly didn't bite or scratch when we quarrelled about the idea of her leaving Max. Rather, she hugged and caressed herself, not like some wounded animal, but more as though she was making love to herself before my estranged eyes — becoming almost oblivious to me, inhabiting some domain dominated by her own senses, exhibiting a radical selfishness which chilled and shocked me more than rage would have done. I should feel compelled to reach out and promise anything whatever if only she would return from her self-imposed autistic exile.

How could she, who was usually so out-going, suddenly go inward thus? I felt that there was a madness in her — not the *mad* of anger, of a whim denied, of desire denied, but the mad of unreason.

This wasn't the Amber whom I had known hitherto. Maybe here was proof that she did truly love me with a consuming passion, a passion which, nonetheless, she had *chosen* to experience for the frisson of it — a passion by which I must in turn fatally be captivated. (And I was, I was; so why was I denying her?)

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That afternoon she departed more like a sleepwalker than a woman incensed.

I know that that same night I dreamed forebodingly of driving the several miles to the airfoil shed and doing such-and-such to one of the cutting-edge craft by torchlight, by dreamlight. In a dream details are elusive. Spurred by trauma, my subconscious mind must have intuited a structural flaw in the newest design. Certainly I woke in my own bed.

Next morning, Isabelle was all smiles. Water under the bridge.

On the low hilltop from which we liked to launch, Max and I both observed her closely as she warmed up and stretched to loosen her body. Kneeling, she strapped in and hooked up. Hang-check, harness check. From the nose-wire a thread of red yarn fluttered, reading the breeze. Hands on the uprights of the control bar, she stood up under sail. She stared well ahead then ran at top speed. She was airborne into the wind rising up the hillside. Perfect.

I was rising over ascending spruce trees. Look: a family of deer down below!

Above, a few patches of cirrocumulus spread wispy fans like lacy bleached corals, tinted faintly by my amber spectacles. I still felt overheated in my thermal underclothes and woolens and gloves and anorak. Well and good! I'd be shivering soon.

Soon enough, spruce was yielding to dwarf pines. As I gained more altitude the pines thinned out. The ground was increasingly jagged and snowy. One never flies the ground, one flies the air. Soon the air was chill, but chill air must still lift over hills, over soaring heights, because of catabatic convection flow. Earlier, occasional poles had marked tracks. No longer, up above the bushline. Earlier, I'd seen dozens of hikers. Now it was as if the whole world had emptied, or as if an alternative world had replaced the previous one. An azure mountain lake on my left. Was some ice still afloat there? I left the lake behind.

A pulse thudded in the pendant tucked above my heart. I found myself looking in vain for blue flowers amidst the snow and cliffs.

In a ravine, through my antique specs, at last I perceived the room — aglow and entire and golden amidst bald boulders with snowy beards and snowy ruffs. Lifting a hand from the control bar, I thrust up my glasses briefly. Of course the room hid itself, chameleon that it was, phenomenon of the realm of amber.

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With amber vision I saw it again so clearly. By a shift of perception, through its ceiling I spied the chandeliers hanging downward almost like reflections. No corset sustained the room nor did any betraying litter of discarded crates lie around — of course not. The room was radiance as much as reality.

Almost, I hesitated. Almost, I fled from the mountains back to the world of a Range Rover and The Wings, the empty Wings, and Max, coping bravely with grief. But my dreams were welling in me, replacing actuality with a more exquisite mode of being.

I began a figure-eight descent, to and fro within the ravine. I intended to alight with a final decisive flare alongside the room. Whether down-gusts buffeted me or the magnetism of so much amber pulled me like a leaf, I found myself swooping down upon the ceiling — surely to shatter it.

Not so, not so. I sprawled upon the amber parquet floor. Above me the allegorical ceiling was intact. I couldn't recall unhooking, yet through a window I saw my sail being borne up and away out of the ravine by wind like a great bird set free.

Scrambling to my feet, I tore off gloves and harness and anorak. It was warm within the room. Within, within! I was inside the treasure room where tsars had stood.

Unable to focus upon any single particular, I scanned the wall mosaics and all the intricate carvings of trees and garlands and shells. So many scenes of nature, so many Gods and Goddesses and other personae. How the faceted amber drops of the chandeliers twinkled. How brightly the clear red plaques shone amidst surrounding yellows and browns. In the giant gilt-framed mirrors at either end of the room I saw myself receding toward infinity. Three windows reached to the floor, their frames richly carved...

Already the ravine had vanished. Dense mist stroked those windows. Condensation trickled. A cloud had nestled down so quickly. Nothing was visible outside.

There were three doors of the folding variety, with ornate frames. I hurried to one but it wouldn't budge. Nor would the next. Nor the third.

Amber. Where was she?

Why, there she was in one of the mirrors — standing alongside one of my more distant reflections! Isabelle was dressed in the same jeans and black polo-neck sweater as on the day she had died. Her flaxen rope of hair hung forward over one shoulder and down her breast, suggestive of a noose not yet knotted. Her expression was weird. She took a step forward.

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She did not give rise in the mirror to multiples of herself. She was the one and only. When I glanced back, she wasn't present in the other mirror at all.

She had advanced again. Now she was only four reflections away from me. Could she see me here in the gleaming room?

"Why did you kill me?" she called out, stepping closer. "Why, Peter, why?"

"I dreamed that I did," I admitted. "But how could I have done so? How could I?"

I had strayed closer to the mirror. She was so near to me now. She shook her head at my answer. The flaxen rope swung.

"Look around me," I begged. "It's the amber room." All the decorations to admire! All the allegories to decode!

I was still wearing my antique spectacles, bewitched by some psychic whilst Hitler's empire of death distintegrated. If I snatched the specs off, would she evaporate — and the treasure room too? Would there only be ravine, and a cold hill's side?

Could I embrace her in here, one last forgiving and delirious time? I opened my arms in tentative invitation. She stepped toward me, smiling eerily, the rope of hair slack in her hands. She was intending to loop it around my neck to exact the perfect revenge inside this locked room! The means of death would completely elude any deduction...

Momentarily I shut my eyes so as not to see her accusing eyes upon me.

What I experienced was the perfusion of myself by another being, by the total essence of another, in a way that surely no other lovers had ever encountered before. I was Isabelle herself, full of memories other than Peter's.

Yet already this essence was being peeled away, emptying me of her so that only half of myself seemed to remain. I fought in vain to remember a tiny fraction of this ephemeral stupendous event. It had been as though a God, or a Goddess, had entered me briefly, granting me a whole extra life filled with incidents and passions. I had not encountered death but its opposite: a doubling of all my days!

Gone from me already, in a robbery absolute, a devastating theft!

Amber wasn't in the room. She was in the other mirror. Her back was to me now. She was pacing away along the line of my reflections.

"Isabelle, come back!" I cried. Vaguer and vaguer she became. Impossible to see her any longer. Only me, and me, and me.

She had never even been in the room with me in physical form. Only her essence had passed through the room, and through me, astonishing me with

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the fullness of a life I had quenched, then abandoning me utterly. Oh this should be the room where murderers were locked, in so elegant a hell! How I wept for myself, and my reflections wept with me.

When I took off the glasses, the room remained. Those doors wouldn't open. Those windows were blanketed by cloud — nor would they break.

I saw her fall from the sky. The failed hang-glider had begun to spin like a sycamore leaf...

I must have been eleven when I first began to dream of flying...

On the way through Immigration an encounter occurred...

Thus it was that I acquired Pavel as my minder...

Neither hunger nor thirst affect me.

I did not notice at first, but after each reliving one of my reflections disappeared from one of the two great mirrors. Initially the queues still looked much the same, but as time repeated itself those queues began visibly shortening.

Now only three reflections remain in one mirror, and two in the other. After five more relivings I shall be on my own.

I live entirely for the brief moment of her passing at the very end of each repetition, of which I always fail to embrace a thousandth part. She wells within me; then the well runs dry.

When my last reflection vanishes, I shall lie down upon the lustrous parquet floor. I shall close my eyes and blindly await, at last, the tangible brush of her rope of hair across my throat. Then I shall truly be joined with her in death.

It can't be that she won't come! It can't be that I shall simply stay here in the room of my dreams with no image of myself to be seen!

Soon another repetition will begin.

All has gone. Only the room remains. I shall lay me down. First I shall strip myself, commencing with the pendant.

But wait!

In Gran-Annie's bead I spy *myself*. I gesture, and the minuscule Peter gestures.

I'm lying on the parquet floor, motionless, tiny, surrounded by amber.

Please pick me up, Isabelle. Please wear me. Wear me in whatever realm you inhabit now.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

Even though the August issue appears in the summer, we put it together just after the Science Fiction Writers of America hold their annual Nebula Awards banquet. This year, Mike Resnick won Best Novella for "Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge" (Oct/Nov.1994) and David Gerrold won Best Novelette for "The Martian Child" (Sept. 1994). This, of course, put us in an award state of mind. So, September's issue includes some award nominees and winners.

Nebula winner **Alan Brennert** (whose "Ma Qui" (Feb. 1991) received Best Short Story) returns to our pages with a haunting, lyrical story of a man with an obsession. "The Man Who Loved the Sea" is Brennert at his finest.

Grand Master **Ray Bradbury** contributes a story of infinite dark, the type of story that is uniquely Bradbury. "Dorian in Excelsis" follows a man who accepts an invitation to a mysterious bar and grille, and has the adventure of this — or any — lifetime.

The issue's main science fiction story (and the inspiration for **Terry Smith**'s cover) comes from multiple award nominee **Robert Reed**. "The Tournament" is about a competition like no other. It is the focus of the nation, and the dream of every person within. But only a few compete, and even fewer reach the upper levels. And that's where the competition really begins...

We will have much, much more in September. Book columnist **Robert K.J. Killheffer** will return, as will humorist **Paul Di Filippo**. September's issue will hold you until our big Anniversary issue where we have even more surprises: Edgar winner **Bruce Holland Rogers**, a collaboration among multiple award nominees (and winners) **Jonathan Lethem, John Kessel,** and **James Patrick Kelly**, a cover by Hugo winner **Bob Eggleton**, and more goodies than we can pack into a tiny paragraph. So make certain your subscription's current.

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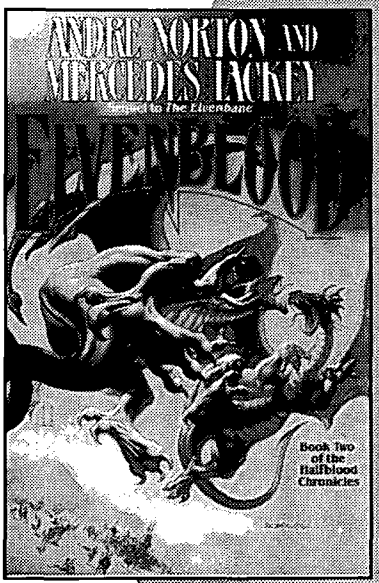

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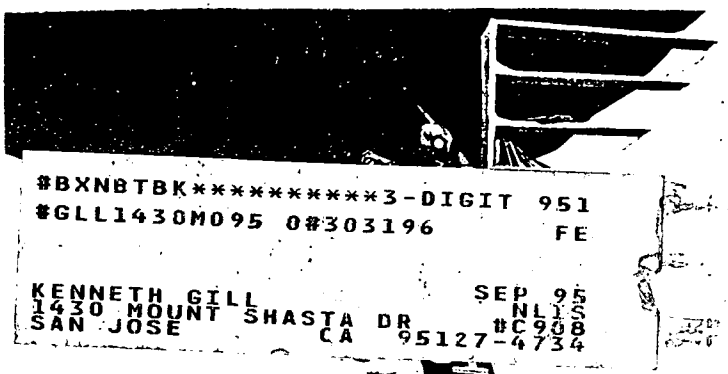

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